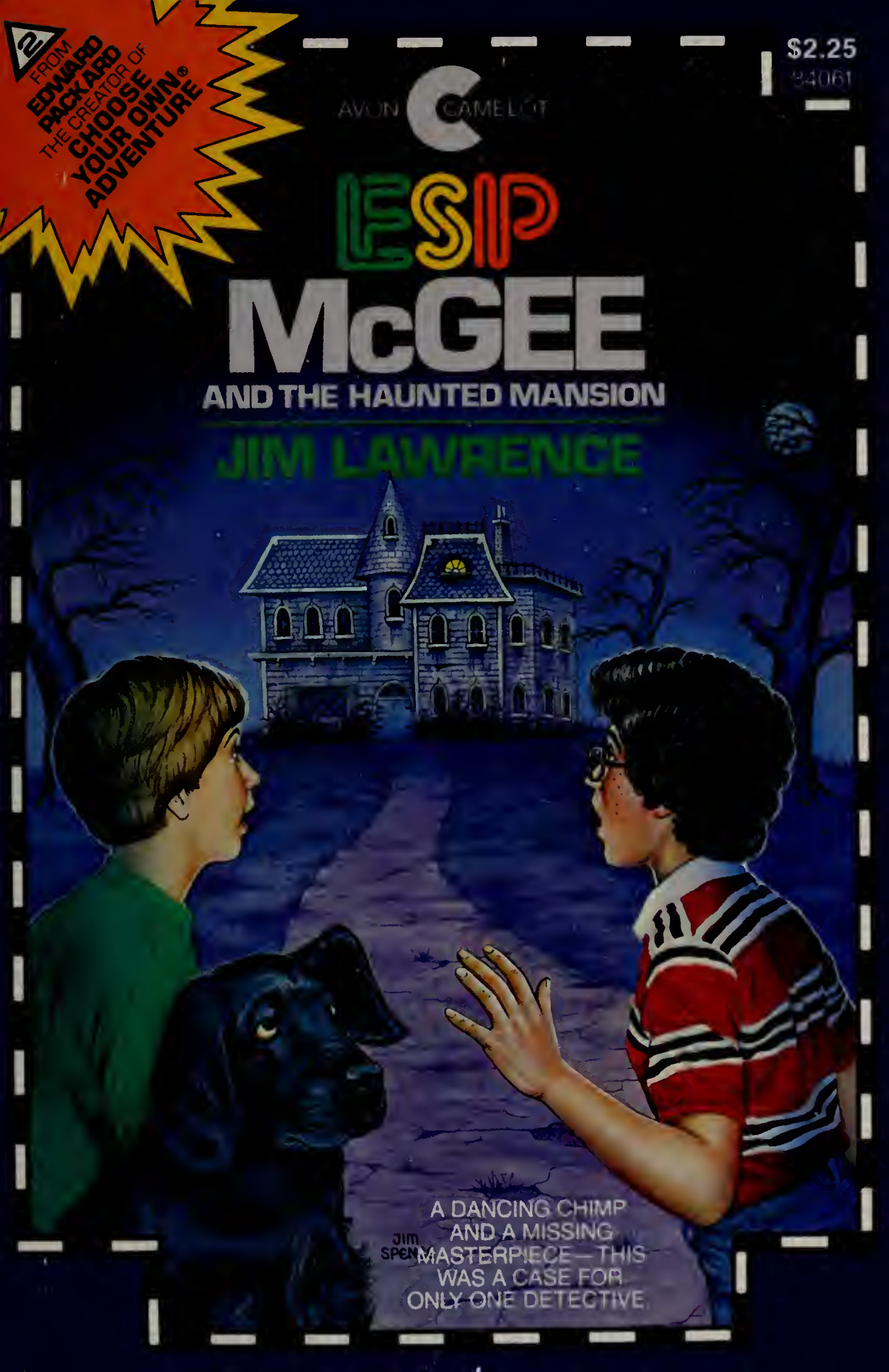
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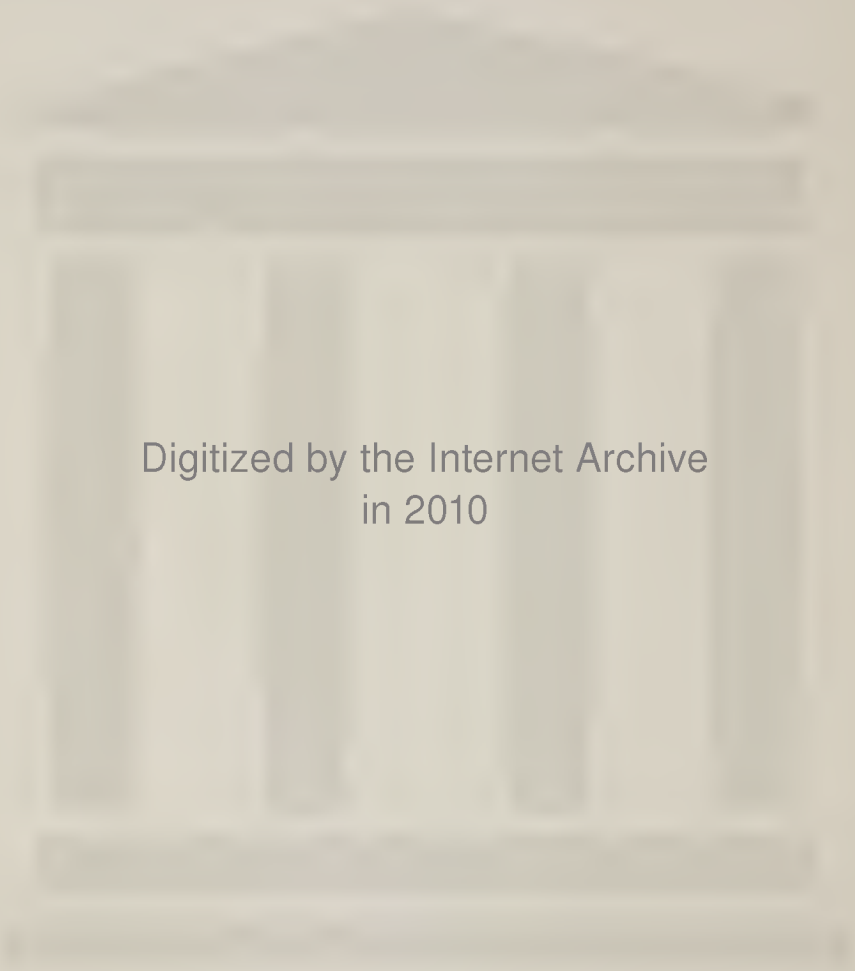
AVON CAMELOT
ESP
McGEE
AND THE HAUNTED MANSION
JIM LAWRENCE
JIM SPENCER
A DANCING CHIMP AND A MISSING MASTERPIECE — THIS WAS A CASE FOR ONLY ONE DETECTIVE



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JIM LAWRENCE is a graduate of the Naval Academy at Annapolis. He has a BA in art education from Wayne State University and a degree in mechanical engineering from the Detroit Institute of Technology, but he has always earned his living as a writer. He is the author of a dozen novels for adults and over fifty detective and adventure books for kids. He also creates scripts for syndicated comic strips and has written for film, radio, and television. Mr. Lawrence lives in Summit, New Jersey.

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ESP McGEE

AND THE HAUNTED MANSION

JIM LAWRENCE

Illustrated by Larry Ross

AN AVON CAMELOT BOOK

5th grade reading level has been determined by using the Fry Readability Scale.

ESP McGEE AND THE HAUNTED MANSION is an original publication of Avon Books. This work has never before appeared in book form.

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ESP McGEE

AND THE HAUNTED MANSION

Chapter One

IT was lunch hour, and—as usual—Nick Cracus, Jack Hopper, McGee and I were sitting around shooting the breeze and eating what passed for food at the Stinson Junior High cafeteria.

"Hey, McGee," said Jack. "Is there any such thing as a haunted house?"

It was the wrong sort of question to ask ESP McGee. He hates being pinned down about spooks or mental telepathy or anything weird like that, even though a lot of people think he's got some pretty strange powers himself!

McGee shrugged and stopped spooning ice cream long enough to say, "Well, maybe . . . and then again, maybe not. I guess it all depends on what you mean by 'haunted.' "

"Aw, come on, McGee. What kind of an answer is that?"

said Hank Gruder, horning in on the conversation. "What does *anyone* mean by haunted?"

"That's the point," said McGee, licking the last drop of strawberry ice cream from his spoon. "One person might say that a place is haunted because it brings back old memories. Someone else might say a song is haunting because he keeps hearing it over and over in his head. And they'd both be right. Haunting just means the past doesn't fade away. It keeps coming back—or trying to, anyway."

I could tell McGee was warming to the question. He pushed his chair back from the table and rubbed the bridge of his nose under his glasses.

"Now take a so-called haunted house," he mused. "Suppose something unusual happened there—maybe even a murder—and the house itself was part of the reason. I mean, maybe it was such an awful, gloomy, depressing place that it got to the people who lived there. One of them finally blew his top and killed whoever was getting on his nerves."

"I know the feeling," said Hank, and his friend Phil snickered. Hank is a big slob who likes to bully kids smaller than he is—kids like McGee, though he never gets far with McGee.

McGee ignored the interruption. "Years later, people can still sense the bad feelings," he continued. "They can imagine the murder taking place, and the images of the past become so vivid in their minds, they start believing the house is haunted. Maybe, in a sense, it is. It's haunted by what happened in the past."

That's the trouble with asking McGee a question, I thought as we drifted out to our favorite loafing spot near the soccer field. He can talk for hours, and in the end you're twice as confused as you were before. Nina Ravinsky says he puts

out a smoke screen of words—like an octopus squirts out clouds of ink—just to throw you off the track. But in my opinion she's wrong. McGee just likes to look at things from all the angles. In any case, I could tell Hank wasn't buying McGee's line of reasoning.

"You're ducking the issue," he said. "Jack asked you a simple question: Is there any such thing as a haunted house? That means haunted by ghosts. Right, Jack?"

"Right," said Jack, though you could see he hated agreeing with Hank.

Everyone waited for McGee to say something, but he didn't seem to notice the silence. He just stared off into space.

Nick gave me a sharp nudge in the ribs. "What's with him?" he said in a loud whisper.

McGee's eyes seemed to come back into focus. "I don't know about ghosts and haunted houses," he said. "You'll have to make up your own minds about that. But I do know that something spooky is going to happen at the old Frome Mansion."

"Wow!"

"What?"

"How do you know?"

Everyone was talking and asking questions at once.

"When?" demanded Hank.

McGee shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Tonight?"

"Could be."

Suddenly the bell rang and that was the end of the discussion. We all had to hurry to get to class.

Now if the average guy came up with a prediction like that, nobody would take him seriously. They'd think he was nuts or just putting on an act. But not McGee.

McGee's predictions have been right so often, you have to take him seriously. The cops sure do. Several times they've asked him to help solve a crime, all because of his strange ability to sense what really happened in a mysterious case—or what's about to happen. For instance, not long ago he stopped a couple of terrorists from causing a meltdown in a nuclear power plant. He could sense what they were thinking, so he knew just how to panic them into giving up. Naturally, his picture's in the paper a lot, and sometimes he's even interviewed on local TV.

McGee has never claimed there's anything special or supernatural about what he does. Whenever he makes a prediction or seems to know what someone's thinking, he seems as baffled as everyone else by what he does. Of course, there are some people who don't believe in his powers—like Nina Ravinsky, for example. I mentioned her before; she's in my class and she lives about halfway between me and McGee. Anyway, she's always putting down McGee's predictions and explaining how he could have figured things out—without any weird mental powers. Well, maybe he is a smart detective, but I'm not sure that's the whole story.

McGee sure doesn't look like a mind reader or fortune-teller, at least not like the ones I've seen on TV. On the outside he's pretty much like any other kid—a little shorter and a little shyer, maybe—but otherwise average. But the fact remains that he does come up with these uncanny predictions. And they always seem to come true. That's how he got his nickname.

McGee's initials are E. S., for Edward Samuel, but a newspaper reporter tacked on another letter and started calling him ESP McGee. (ESP stands for extrasensory perception, in case you don't know.)

My name is Matt Terrell, by the way. Last summer my family moved to Greenport, Connecticut, and that's when I got to know McGee. The guy fascinated me right from the start. Besides, I liked him, and we hit it off pretty well. So we wound up hanging around together, and I was with him when he stopped the terrorists from causing a meltdown in the power plant. But that's another story.

On this particular afternoon, rumors of McGee's prediction spread around the school like wildfire. And you can imagine what happened. At least half a dozen kids decided to check out Frome Mansion. Some, like Jack, were hoping to catch a glimpse of a ghost. Others, like Hank and Phil, were hoping to see McGee fall on his face for a change. Me, I figured anything was better than staying home with my kid sister Emily. Besides, I had a personal interest in Frome Mansion.

Once upon a time, it belonged to a man named Junius Frome. He lived there with his sister Agatha, who's still alive. She's a straight-backed old lady with blue-tinted hair and a sharp tongue. My mom and I know her pretty well, and that's how I happened to know about the Frome family even before the spooky business started.

Frome Mansion isn't in Greenport. It's in Seacove, the next town up the coast, but everyone has heard of the old place. The Fromes used to be pretty important people in this part of New England. The first ones came over on the *Mayflower,* and their descendants fought King George in the Revolutionary War. From there on, they were sea captains and town merchants and bankers and whatnot, and by the time Junius Frome came along, the family practically owned Seacove.

Junius was different, though. He started out as a banker and stockbroker, but he gave it all up to become an artist.

The problem was, no one took him seriously. His pictures were, well, pretty far out. They didn't look the way people thought pictures ought to look. Not to put too fine a point on it, the townsfolk decided Junius Frome was cuckoo and considered his paintings a joke.

From some of the stories I've heard, he *did* sound like an oddball. His sister Agatha put up with his pranks for a while. But finally she got fed up and moved to the other side of town.

After that, she and Junius never spoke again. He became what they call a recluse. He stayed shut up in his house most of the time, and rarely spoke to anyone in Seacove. Eventually, he died.

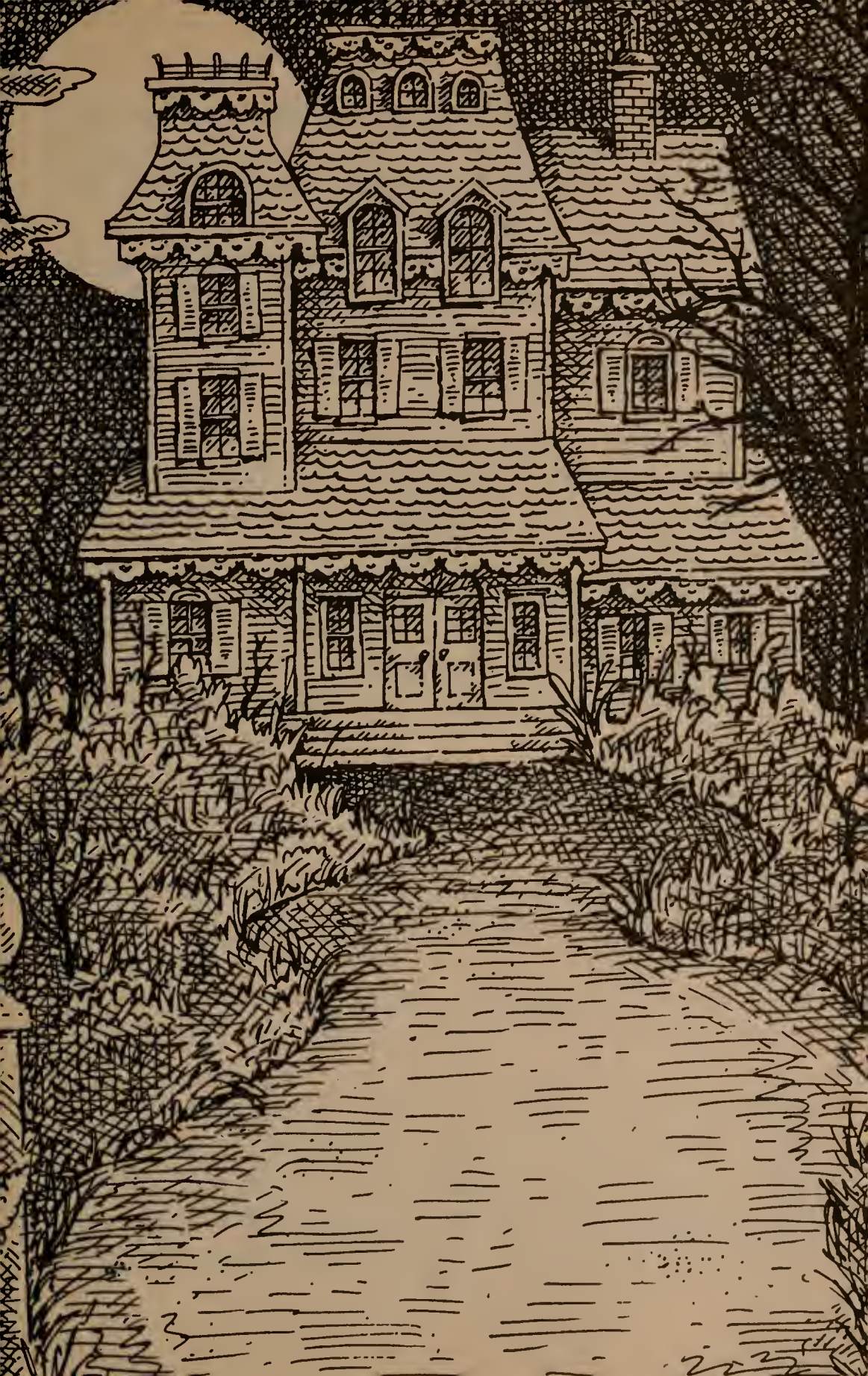
Anyhow, the evening after ESP McGee predicted there'd be ghostly goings-on at the old Frome Mansion, he and I decided to go over there and take a look around the place. Seacove's not all that far from Greenport—in fact, they're twin cities separated by a single street—and I figured McGee could use the exercise, what with all the ice cream he puts away. So I suggested we walk for a change, instead of taking our bikes. He said okay, and my Newfoundland dog, Loser, tagged along with us.

Dusk was falling when we started out, and by the time we got to the mansion it was already dark. Even so, we could spot a couple of guys skulking across the street from the old house. Judging by their shapes, one of them had to be Blimpo Bailey. The other turned out to be Nick Cracus.

"What're you guys doing here?" I inquired.

"Same thing you are," said Nick. "Checking out Frome Mansion."

It was a pretty scary-looking hunk of real estate, especially at night: a big, old, three-story Victorian house with a square tower and pointy eaves dripping with fancy ginger-



bread. There was a gravel driveway curving up to the house, which stood on a slight rise, and you can see the place had been kept up—even though the grounds all around it were overgrown with shrubbery and weeds.

While we were watching, some other kids showed up, including Jack Hopper and those two goons Hank Gruder and Phil Mahaffy.

"What's going on over there, McGee?" Jack asked anxiously.

"Well," McGee said thoughtfully. "Junius Frome was an artist. Someone might be looking for some of his paintings."

Hank gave one of his nasty horse laughs. "Oh, artistic ghosts, huh?"

"Or thieves, maybe," McGee said quietly.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Blimpo let out a squeaky little cry. "Hey, look!"

A light flickered in one of the upstairs windows.

Chapter Two

As we all stared with our mouths open, the light disappeared. Then it showed again in one of the other windows.

"McGee's right!" Nick blurted out. "There's some kind of monkey business going on over there! And I'm going to find out what it is."

He darted across the street and up the driveway. The rest of us followed—I guess we got carried away by the excitement.

Before I knew it, things got out of hand. First Loser gave a few excited barks. When some of the kids tried to shush him, the big dummy started prancing around and knocked over a couple of empty trash cans that were standing at one side of the house. The cans went rolling down the driveway

with a horrible clatter. Blimpo didn't dodge out of the way fast enough and got bowled over. Next thing I knew, *he* was rolling down the driveway along with the trash cans. Then, either he or the cans must have bumped into Hank Gruder, because Hank let out a startled yelp and began punching Blimpo.

As if that weren't enough, a police siren wailed nearby. In fact, it was getting louder by the split second! A blazing spotlight pinned us in its glare as a patrol car turned up the driveway and braked with a spray of gravel. The doors flew open and two Seacove cops jumped out.

So did ESP McGee.

As I found out later, when the rest of us went charging across the street, McGee very sensibly ran off to call the police. Only it turned out he didn't have to, because he spotted this cruiser less than a block away and flagged it down.

Like practically every cop in our part of Connecticut, they knew all about McGee and his reputation as a crime-solver. So they took him aboard and listened to his story and came speeding up to Frome Mansion.

McGee didn't look any too happy, though. What with the noise we'd made and the cops' siren and flasher and spotlight, we had ruined any chance of taking the housebreakers by surprise . . . if that's what they were.

"Okay, you kids," bellowed a cop with sergeant's stripes. "What's going on here?"

"I already told you, officer," McGee said patiently. "We saw a light moving around in the upstairs windows."

Of course it was gone now. And when the two patrolmen checked the mansion's doors, they were all locked.

"Hmm, looks like we may have a new mystery here for you to solve, ESP," said the sergeant.

"If you ask me, the kids were probably seeing things,"

said the cop with no stripes. "Or maybe what they saw was just the street lights reflected in the house windows."

"I don't know about that." The sergeant scowled and rocked back and forth on his heels. "After all, we did get radio instructions to keep an eye on this place. I think we better get in touch with the real estate people and make sure everything's okay inside."

His partner shrugged. "If you say so, Sarge. In the meantime, you kids beat it. Go on home, all of you!"

The cops probably would have let McGee stick around if he'd wanted to. But I could see he was pretty annoyed at the way they were handling the situation, so he hiked back to Greenport with me and the rest of the gang.

It wasn't until the next morning that I got the full story. According to the TV news, the Seacove cops had been alerted by the Art Squad of the New York City Police Department that Frome Mansion might become a target for burglars. And sure enough, it had.

That flickering light we had seen in the upstairs windows was no mirage, and no reflection of street lamps, either. When the patrolmen got the real estate agent to come and open up, they found clear signs of an intruder—a forced second-story window, overturned furniture, and marks in the dust. They figured the crook or crooks must have reached the upstairs window by climbing the big old apple tree that grew close to the house.

"Nice going, McGee!" said Nick when we gathered outside the school that morning.

"How the heck did you do it?" asked Jack.

"Maybe I can shed some light on that," said a girl's voice.

I didn't even have to turn around to know it was Nina Ravinsky. "Okay, what's the angle now?" I said.

With a triumphant look on her face, she showed us a clipping from the Sunday *New York Times.* It was all about Junius Frome and his work. Apparently, art critics had suddenly decided he was a genius. So now any of his paintings the New York art galleries could get hold of were going like hotcakes—and bringing huge prices.

The story also mentioned that when Junius died, everyone assumed that a lot more paintings would be found in his mansion. But none had ever turned up.

"Are you saying this is why McGee knew there'd be spooky goings-on at Frome Mansion?" I asked Nina.

"Figure it out," she retorted. "If Junius Frome's paintings are now worth lots of money, and people get the idea there may still be a bunch of them hidden in Frome Mansion—well, doesn't it stand to reason that treasure hunters or art thieves might try to break in?"

Nina turned to McGee. "Your parents get the Sunday *Times,* don't they?"

He nodded thoughtfully. "Uh-huh."

"Then you saw the story?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it, I do recall seeing the headline about Junius Frome when I was reading an article about computer animation on the same page. I may even have read the opening paragraph or two about his paintings becoming popular."

Nina tapped the *Times* clipping with her finger. "Well, at least you'll admit this would explain how you guessed something might happen at Frome Mansion," she said sharply. "Right?"

Everyone looked at McGee. He just smiled vaguely and

scratched his head. Judging by the expression on his face, he thought it was kind of an interesting question, but he didn't know the answer. And didn't really care all that much, one way or the other.

"Could be, I guess," he said. "If you want to think so, I sure can't prove you're wrong."

Nina looked as mad as a wet hen. And disappointed, too. I could see she'd been hoping McGee would give her an argument.

It wasn't until later that I realized there was a slight catch in Nina's theory. The mention of Junius Frome's missing paintings didn't come until the last part of the newspaper story. The part ESP McGee hadn't read.

Chapter Three

THE warning bell rang and we all went inside, so it wasn't until lunch hour that another gab session about last night's ghostly caper got started.

"How come there's all this mix-up about the old guy's paintings?" asked Blimpo. He only spoke between mouthfuls, so he had to get his words out pretty fast.

"There's no mix-up," said Jack. "It's just that nobody knows what happened to them."

"Why not?"

"Don't ask me! Junius Frome's gardener and handyman said he kept getting deliveries of art stuff—like paints and canvas. But no one could find any pictures in the house after he died. At least that's what it said in the newspaper clipping Nina was passing around."

Hank Gruder came over to listen in. He straddled a chair facing McGee. "So what happened to all the paintings, spook brain?"

McGee just lifted his shoulders in a who-knows? shrug and went on enjoying his chocolate marshmallow ice cream.

I figured it might be a good idea to cut in before Gruder decided to get nasty. "Junius Frome could have hidden the paintings himself," I remarked loudly. "He was a real oddball."

"How would you know, Terrell?" Hank sneered. "You've only been living here for a few months. You weren't even born yet when the old coot kicked the bucket!"

"True," I said, "but Mom knows his sister Agatha, and I do yard work for her every week."

See, Mom's a nut on history and genealogy. She has traced both sides of our family back four or five generations. And almost as soon as we moved to Greenport, she joined the county historical society. Miss Agatha Frome also belongs to the society, and knows practically all there is to know about the history of this part of Connecticut. Pretty soon the two of them were fast friends, which explains how I happen to know so much about the old-time Fromes. I picked up the info from Mom and Miss Agatha herself when I did yard work. I was explaining all this to the guys when Nick interrupted.

"Come on, Matt," he urged. "Stop holding out on us. What did you find out about old man Frome? I mean, how come you say he was such an oddball?"

"Well, he used to travel all over the world. And once he cabled his sister from Paris that he'd just gotten engaged to a Russian ballet dancer. He *said* she was a countess."

"A real countess?"

"Search me, but she sure didn't act like one. She had

some real Russian-sounding name. Nadya something—Nadya Gospodinovna, I think. Junius claimed she was related to the czar and had to flee from Moscow on account of the Russian Revolution. He said he was going to bring her back to Seacove to pose for his paintings. I don't know if she did that, but I do know she shocked the wits out of all the Fromes' high society friends."

"How?" said Blimpo, looking up bug-eyed from his apple pie a la mode.

"Well, whenever they were invited out, the countess would guzzle champagne like it was tap water. Then she'd go into her Dance of the Seven Veils."

Everyone at our table snickered, but Nina Ravinsky spoke up coldly from the table just behind us. "There's nothing funny about that, Terrell. The poor woman may have been emotionally disturbed."

"Maybe so," I said. "Anyhow, on his next trip, Junius Frome went to Africa. And this time he cabled his sister that he was bringing home a very talented chimpanzee."

"Talented at what?" asked Jack.

"Dancing. According to him, the natives had named it something that meant 'dancer' in Swahili—which is an African language—because the chimp took part in their tribal dances. So he said when he brought it back to Seacove, the chimp could act as Nadya's ballet partner. And it did. They actually performed a number together at some local charity benefit show."

"Like this, you mean?" Jack exclaimed.

He grabbed Blimpo by the hand and yanked him up out of his chair for an impromptu demonstration. Blimpo waddled around like a dancing chimp, while Jack did a belly-dancing routine, using a paper napkin as a veil. But they both sat

down fast when their antics threatened to catch the eye of Mr. Huff, the shop teacher, who was cafeteria monitor for the day.

By now all the kids were laughing—all except Nina. I could see she wasn't amused. Finally the laughter died down and I went on with the story.

"Later on, when everyone made fun of Junius's paintings, he pulled another crazy stunt. He gave the chimp some finger paints and then presented the Seacove Art Museum with its smeary 'masterpieces.' That was the last straw for Miss Agatha. She packed up and moved out.

"Gradually, the whole town turned against Junius. Miss Agatha said it got to the point where no one would even speak to the poor old joker anymore. So finally he shut himself up in his mansion with the countess, and they were never seen in public again."

"What happened to *her*?" asked Nick.

"Good question!" I said, enjoying the limelight while I had it. "That's the rest of the mystery. One day the gardener knocked on the door for his pay, and no one answered. So he called the police. They went inside and found Junius had passed away in his sleep. But there were no paintings and no sign of the countess. She'd disappeared!"

"Maybe she skipped out with the paintings—ever think of that?" said Hank, looking pleased with his own cleverness.

"Maybe." I shrugged. "The only thing is, if she did, she still has them. They've never turned up for sale at any art gallery. At least as far as anyone knows. And, of course," I added, "that's not the only possible explanation for her disappearance."

"Yeah? What's another?"

"Maybe the countess died before Junius Frome did. And

maybe he buried her right there at the mansion—either inside, or somewhere out on the grounds."

Boy, that really stopped the conversation! Suddenly all the kids' faces seemed to turn serious. I could just imagine what was going through their minds. They were thinking of those spooky lights at the mansion last night. Except now they were wondering if the robbers might have been scared off by ghosts . . . the ghosts of that Russian countess and Junius Frome!

When we got out of school, Rick Powell, a reporter for the *Greenport Gazette,* was waiting to interview ESP McGee. He had heard about our adventures at Frome Mansion and had spent the day dredging up all the old gossip about Junius.

"You're pretty good at looking into the future, McGee," he said. "How about taking a peek into the past for a change?"

"Uh, well, I really don't 'take peeks' in either direction," said McGee. "Sometimes I just get ideas about certain events, that's all."

"Well, try casting your mind back and let's hear your ideas about Junius Frome's wife—the so-called Russian countess, Nadya Gospodinovna."

"What do you mean, my ideas about her?"

"Like what happened to her? Do you think she took off for Paris or Russia? Or did she die before Junius did? If she's still alive, where can we find her?" He got out his notebook and ballpoint and was all ready to scribble down ESP McGee's scoop about the countess.

McGee looked uncomfortable. He ran his fingers through his dark hair and shook his head. "Sorry, I don't know where to find her, except . . ."

"Yeah? Go on!"

"Well, when I try to concentrate on her, I keep getting a mental image of a . . . a tombstone."

"A tombstone! You mean, Nadya's dead? She's buried right there at Frome Mansion?"

McGee flung out his hands impatiently. "I don't know. That's all I can tell you."

Rick Powell's pen was already flying over the paper. "Never mind, pal!" he said, breaking off writing to slap McGee on the back. "That's terrific! You've given me a great new lead for my front-page story. Thanks a million!"

He hopped into his beat-up compact and took off down the street, to the newspaper office, I supposed, to file his latest red-hot scoop on the Frome mystery.

McGee sighed. "When will I learn to keep my mouth shut?"

Chapter Four

WHEN I got home, I was surprised to see my kid sister Emily running around the house in her bathing suit. She greeted me with a wave of her snorkle. "Hi, Matt. Have you seen my fins?"

"Where are you going?" I said. "The community pool's not open yet. It's only April."

"Who's going to the pool?" she replied. "Mrs. McGee's setting up a new ecosystem in one of her big tanks, and she invited Mom and me over to help."

I should explain that Mrs. McGee is a marine biologist, and half their house is fish tanks—some of them as big as rooms. I should also explain that Emily is a word freak. "Ecosystem" was obviously the latest addition to her collection.

"Great," I said, starting up the stairs to change into my trunks. "Tell Mom I'll go too. McGee and I will help."

"Oh no you won't, big boy."

"Who says?"

"I do," said Emily, sticking out her tongue. "It just so happens this is for ladies only. Besides, it's your day for doing Miss Agatha's yard work."

She was right, darn her. I'd forgotten all about it.

An hour later I had changed clothes, eaten a quick snack, and was on my way to Seacove, with Loser trotting alongside my bike. I stopped off at McGee's house to see if he wanted to come along. He was standing in the front yard, reading a copy of the *Gazette*—which had just hit the streets—and looking none too pleased about it. He said, sure, he'd come along to keep me company.

"From the look of those headlines," I remarked as we coasted down Hillside Road into Seacove, "the paper is playing this Frome thing up big."

"Yeah, too big," McGee grumbled. "Including my alleged 'prediction' about Countess Nadya's tombstone being found soon."

He sounded annoyed at Rick Powell's write-up. But I noticed he didn't deny the tombstone quotation, even though he hadn't actually *predicted* anything.

It turned out Miss Agatha had also read about McGee in the *Greenport Gazette.* Somewhat to my surprise, she seemed pleased that he had come with me.

"You're quite a celebrity, young man!" she said, looking him up and down through her lorgnette. (They're those glasses on a handle—she actually uses them, no kidding!)

"So are you, ma'am." McGee grinned back at her.

She seemed to take to him right away and invited him to join her on the porch while I cut the grass.

I got her power mower out of the big old garage and began jockeying it back and forth over the lawn. Meanwhile, McGee and Miss Agatha sat rocking and chatting away like old friends.

When I was done, she had her maid bring out lemonade on a tray. I gulped down one glassful immediately and then sipped another while I lounged back in the porch rocker and listened to the conversation. McGee had gotten Miss Agatha talking about her brother.

"In a way, I'm sorry now that I abandoned Junius," she mused aloud. Her bamboo cane lay across her lap; her sharp old eyes gazed off into the distance, as if she were playing back scenes from the past. "Of course, his jokes got tiresome after a while. And I've no doubt his precious 'Countess Nadya' was nothing but a common gypsy fortune-teller . . . she certainly dressed like one! All the same, Junius was a talented artist. I knew that all along, so I should have had the patience to put up with him."

"Why *did* you walk out, Miss Agatha?" McGee prodded gently.

"Oh, I daresay it was that chimpanzee he brought back from Africa," she said, sighing. "The creature was utterly uninhibited. Its naughty pranks were embarrassing enough, and then Junius deliberately used it to annoy people.

"Junius had already shown on various occasions what he thought of the museum curator's taste and judgment," she went on. "But presenting the museum with his monkey's finger paintings, and then expecting the curator to hang them—well, really, that was *too much*! I felt it was disrespectful to the

memory of our great-grandfather who built the Seacove Art Museum!"

Just then a blue Mercedes sedan pulled up to the curb. A fussy-looking, bald-headed guy with pinch-nose glasses got out, clutching a briefcase. I soon learned he was the Frome family lawyer, J. Ogden Trimble.

Miss Agatha gazed at him through her glasses-on-a-handle as he came walking up to the porch. "Well! Good afternoon, Mr. Trimble!"

When she introduced me and ESP McGee, the lawyer went "Hmph!" and cocked an eyebrow at McGee in a fishy half-scowl.

Miss Agatha invited him to sit down and have some lemonade while he told her what he'd come about.

Opening his briefcase, the lawyer extracted a copy of the *Gazette.* "Miss Frome, my phone hasn't stopped ringing since *this* came out. Television reporters, newspaper reporters, wire service reporters—all wanting to know about the (ahem!) so-called Countess Nadya Gospodinovna."

"Precisely what do they want to know?"

"Whether or not your brother left a will. And if so, whether or not it contains any references to the (ahem!) countess."

"And what did you tell them, Mr. Trimble?"

"Nothing, of course. But I feel it is my duty to remind you that the will is on file at the courthouse, and sooner or later one of those nosy chaps is likely to dig it out and discover that . . ." The lawyer broke off to glare suspiciously at me and McGee.

"Discover what, Mr. Trimble?" the old lady said sharply.

"Well, ma'am, the fact that your brother's will left instructions for flowers to be strewn regularly on a certain

(ahem!) stone slab in one corner of the Frome Mansion grounds."

I suppose the lawyer would call *me* a pretty "nosy chap," because—to make a long story short—about twenty minutes after McGee and I returned to Greenport, I was on my way back to Seacove with Nick Cracus and Jack Hopper for reinforcements. McGee wouldn't come with us. He said there was a book he wanted to look up at the library—something about "out-of-body experiences." But the rest of us were dying with curiosity to check out that "certain stone slab in one corner of the Frome Mansion grounds."

On the way we ran into Nina and her friend Sue Tuttle, so there was quite a train of us bicycling up the mansion driveway.

It didn't take us long to find the slab, even though it was heavily overgrown with weeds. Carved on its face were two big letters: NG!

"Nadya Gospodinovna!" I exclaimed.

"The countess?" Nick said.

"Just like McGee predicted—her tombstone would soon be found!" Jack said in an awed voice. "Man, oh man, that guy is something else!"

"Well, he didn't actually *predict* that," I hedged, but before I could go any further, Nina Ravinsky cut in.

"He certainly *didn't* predict it. He merely put two and two together, you might say."

"And why might I say that?" I inquired.

"Because the evidence was there for anyone to see," Nina announced, batting her green eyes as if she knew that always threw me off balance.

"What evidence?" Nick asked her.

"In case you people don't know it, Junius Frome gave several of his paintings to local tradesmen. One of them went to Schulz's Funeral Parlor, here in Seacove. And now that Junius Frome is famous, Mr. Schulz has put it out on display for everyone to see, including Matt's brilliant friend, Edward Samuel McGee," she added sarcastically.

Needless to say, the gang went biking off pronto to the funeral parlor. Sure enough, there was the painting, set up in a glass-covered frame on the front lawn.

It was a weird-looking picture of a cemetery, which no

doubt explained why Junius had presented it to the local undertaker.

Nina pointed to a slab in one corner of the picture—and guess what? If you looked real close, you could see that it bore the letters NG.

"So that's how McGee guessed the countess's tombstone would be found!" said Nick.

I didn't feel like arguing, so I just kept quiet. Maybe Nina Ravinsky was right. She was certainly smart enough at figuring things out. But I noticed she only figured them out *after* McGee had already come up with the answer.

Also, I had been with him after school the last two days, so when would he have had time to make any trips over to Seacove to see the painting in front of Schulz's Funeral Parlor?

Chapter Five

THERE'S a small botanical park in Seacove. It's called Frome Gardens, and like the art museum, it was presented to the town by the Frome family. It's especially famous for its lilacs, so every April when they burst into bloom, Miss Agatha holds a garden party there to mark the spring opening of the park.

There are free sandwiches and hot dogs and fruit punch for everyone who wants to come and see the flowers and trees and unusual plants. Some of the plants are in greenhouses. But there are also winding paths and benches so you can enjoy the outdoor blossoms and greenery.

This year the annual garden party was held on the Saturday right after the news broke about the stone slab. Mr. Trimble was right. Those "nosy chaps" at the *Gazette* had gotten

hold of a copy of the will, and the park was swarming with curious people, McGee and me among them.

Miss Agatha was standing by the refreshment table greeting visitors as they came in. The mayor and the other town bigshots were clustered around her. They probably got valuable publicity out of the garden party. There were certainly lots of cameras and reporters around. Rick Powell was on hand, and I even noticed a TV crew prowling around the park.

The minute Miss Agatha's eagle eye lighted on me and McGee, she beckoned us over to the refreshment table. "Well, boys! Are you enjoying my party?" she inquired, waggling her cane at us.

"It's great, Miss Agatha!" I said, nervously watching Loser out of the corner of my eye. He had tagged along with us, and he's not a dog you can trust around food. I gave him a good hard warning glare, and the shaggy monster hung his head sheepishly and went skulking under the table, which, fortunately, was high enough for him to skulk under.

"Oh, thanks!" I said, looking hastily back at Miss Agatha as she handed McGee and me each a paper cup full of fruit punch. I was already munching on a hot dog, and McGee had just finished an ice cream sandwich.

"Come along with me, you two, while I walk around and mingle with my guests!"

"Our pleasure, ma'am!" McGee said, offering his arm. Miss Agatha beamed at him approvingly. That guy sure knows how to get around old ladies!

You could tell Mayor Norris's nose was out of joint over the way she just walked off and left him there like a bump on a log. A second later, he was practically pop-eyed with rage.

Loser, who was still under the table, had seen us walk

away and wanted to go after us. But there were so many legs in the way, he got confused about which were whose—and darted *between* the mayor's legs!

For about ten yards, Mayor Norris was actually riding Loser bareback. Then he got dumped on the seat of his pants. I was cringing with embarrassment, of course, but what could I do except help dust off the mayor and get Loser out of his sight as quickly as possible. After that, I rejoined Miss Agatha and McGee, trying to act as though nothing special had happened.

People began trailing after us, waiting for a chance to have a word with her. One was Ezra Schulz, the undertaker.

"You may be pleased to know, Miss Frome," he said, "that I have just received an offer from a Boston art gallery for that splendid painting your brother so graciously presented to me and my, er, establishment."

The old lady was wearing her lorgnette on a silver chain around her neck. She picked it up now and peered coldly at the funeral director.

Schulz gave a fluttery little laugh. You could see Miss Agatha really made him nervous. "I, er—ha, ha—refused to sell, of course. I'm confident even larger offers will soon be made. Not that I, um, mean to imply for a minute that your brother's genius should be thought of only in terms of money!"

"Do tell?" the old lady said in an icy voice. "If you want my personal opinion, that particular painting is in abominable taste! I can't imagine what Junius was thinking of."

Schulz gulped and looked as if he wished the ground would open and swallow him up.

A tall, raw-boned man came pushing past the undertaker to offer his respects to Miss Agatha. He turned out to be a real

estate agent named Frank Prang. I'd often noticed his signs in front of houses that were up for sale: SEE PRANG FOR PROPERTIES! Apparently his firm took care of the old Frome Mansion.

"Don't tell me you've found a buyer at last, Mr. Prang?" said Miss Agatha.

"Well, not yet, Miss Frome, but we keep pushing it," he said briskly. "Not too many buyers around, of course, for a place that large. And that old. Meantime, I just wanted to let you know we're keeping a sharp eye out for vandals. There'll be no more break-ins, I can assure you."

I flashed McGee a "tell me about it" look. There sure hadn't been any sign of a guard or watchman on duty when the gang and I had gone to look for that stone slab!

Miss Agatha didn't take much stock in his hot air, either. "Hmph," she sniffed. "Locking the stable door after the horse is stolen, eh?"

Prang never even got a chance to defend himself. A television news crew came up just then to shoot an interview with the old lady. And when they were done, a funny-looking stranger caught her eye.

He was a big guy with a potbelly and little tiny hands and feet. He was all duded up in a silk suit, curly-brimmed hat and white gloves, and he had a fancy twirled-up mustache.

"May I introduce myself, Miss Frome?" He doffed his hat and offered her a lavender-colored calling card.

Miss Agatha studied it through her glasses-on-a-handle. "Ulysses Hakim, eh?"

"At your service, Madame! As you see from my card, I am a New York art dealer. You may recall that I phoned you last week."

"Ah, yes! About other paintings by my brother. Unfortu-

nately, Mr. Hakim, my brother and I were not on speaking terms in his later years, so he did not see fit to present me with any of his masterpieces."

"Of course, of course! I understand completely, Madame. Rather a touchy person to deal with, no doubt, like many other artistic geniuses. Still, if any more of his canvases should turn up, I trust you will allow me to see and bid on them!"

Hakim bowed and smiled as we strolled on.

"He said he phoned you last week," I murmured to Miss Agatha. "That sounds as if he knew all about your brother's paintings, even before that article appeared in the Sunday *New York Times.*"

"Oh, definitely," she replied. "But of course there'd already been a write-up on Junius in one of the national art magazines. And the whole New York art world knew his work was coming into fashion."

A thought seemed to strike McGee. His eyebrows puckered into a frown. "Miss Agatha, did you have a premonition there might be trouble at your brother's mansion?"

Miss Agatha gave him a startled look as if he'd just proved he could read her mind. Then she nodded slowly. "I suppose one could say that. At any rate, after that odd-looking art dealer phoned me, I suspected there might be a flood of curiosity seekers—perhaps even treasure hunters—wanting to go through the house. So I called Mr. Prang and told him to admit no more visitors without my express permission, even if they pretended they were eager to buy the house."

Later, when I stopped to think it over, an odd notion occurred to me. Maybe Miss Agatha's instructions had *caused* that spooky business at the mansion. I mean, maybe crooks

wanted to look for any paintings Junius might have stashed away in the house. But after they found out they couldn't get in by posing as potential house buyers, the only way left was to break in at night!

By now, we were circling back toward the refreshment stand and the town bigwigs. J. Ogden Trimble was standing there, sipping punch and fidgeting around as if he were just waiting for the old lady to come back. He looked even more fussy and worry-wartish than he had when we'd seen him at her house.

After mumbling a few polite words to Miss Agatha about her garden party, he got down to business. "No doubt you're aware that, as I feared, the news leaked out about that stone slab at your brother's mansion." He broke off to cast an evil-eye glance at me and McGee, especially McGee.

The old lady just gave him a cool nod. "Of course I'm aware, Mr. Trimble. I read the papers and listen to the news broadcasts, just as you do—or did you think I was too scatty-brained for that? As you pointed out, Junius's will is on file at the courthouse, so the facts about the tombstone were bound to become public."

Mayor Norris cleared his throat loudly. "I'm glad you brought up that subject, Mr. Trimble. Perhaps now is the time to inform you that Ordinance 127-B of the Seacove Town Council Enactments forbids burial anywhere within the township limits except in a graveyard!"

Trimble looked the mayor up and down. You could just tell what he was thinking: How dare you instruct *me* in the law, you scruffy little political nobody!

"What are you trying to tell us, Mayor?" said Miss Agatha.

Mayor Norris immediately looked a little more humble

and cleared his throat again. "The fact is, Miss Frome, last night the Town Council voted that the grave must be dug up and the contents removed to a proper burial site within twenty-four hours!"

I probably don't need to say that the mayor's announcement caused a real sensation in the park.

Right away, the TV camera crew and all the reporters on hand were clamoring for a statement from practically anyone who was willing to be quoted. Agatha Frome wasn't. So Rick Powell cornered McGee.

"What do you see in your crystal ball, ESP?" he asked. "Will the body of Countess Nadya Gospodinovna be found in the tomb?"

McGee reddened and squirmed uncomfortably. He looked down at the toe of his left running shoe and then up at Miss Agatha, as if he were asking her permission to answer the question.

"Go right ahead, my boy," she replied. "If you have any foresight as to what or who lies beneath that stone slab, speak up by all means!"

McGee sighed. "In that case, I'll just say this much: When the tomb is opened, I think it'll disclose a shocking surprise!"

Chapter Six

At 3:00 that afternoon, the Town Council's orders were carried out. A squad car pulled up in the driveway of Frome Mansion and Seacove's Chief Bobkin got out with a couple of his men. The two officers opened the car's trunk and took out spades and crowbars.

Interest was running high after ESP McGee's prediction, and people were tramping all over the grounds, waiting to see what kind of gruesome surprise the cops would turn up.

The stone slab alone was no easy job to remove, because it had sunk partway into the ground. Besides, it was good old New England granite and must have weighed a ton.

Chief Bobkin had his cap shoved back on his head and his sleeves rolled up as if he were right in the thick of the toil. Actually, he didn't do a thing except bark out orders. The two

cops did all the work—and they were really sweating by the time they finished manhandling that slab out of the way!

Then they had to dig down several feet. Finally their spades banged on something hard. Everyone got excited, thinking it might be a coffin lid. But it turned out to be concrete. So Chief Bobkin had to call a halt while an air compressor and jackhammer were brought in.

The layer of concrete wasn't very thick and soon cracked apart. It had been poured over a fine mesh screen, which in turn had been laid over a metal grille. Both these had to be pried up to open the crypt.

Inside was a big brassbound trunk.

All the onlookers crowded closer, ooohing and aaahing, as the two hard-working cops got hold of a handle at one end and pulled the trunk out of the crypt.

"What do you think, McGee?" Blimpo Bailey said in a loud whisper. He had a bag of candy with him and was cramming munchies into his mouth by the handful. Even a grave-opening hadn't spoiled his appetite.

"What do I think?"

"Yeah! Will they find the countess's corpse in that trunk?"

McGee stared at Blimpo owlishly. "I think you should knock off eating that junk food," he said.

There was a padlock through the hasp of the trunk lid. But it didn't last long, once the cops went at it with a hammer and chisel.

Finally Chief Bobkin opened the trunk lid. The ooohing and aaahing got louder than ever. People pushed forward, exclaiming, "What's in it?" "Let's have a look."

What they got was a gasp of disgust from Chief Bobkin.

There seemed to be something dark and hairy inside the trunk. Bobkin made his two men pull it out.

It was a stuffed chimpanzee!

People started laughing, but Loser let out a growl. Before I could grab his collar, he shot straight toward the chimp. He must have looked pretty ferocious, because Chief Bobkin tried to get out of his way fast. Loser stopped short in surprise when he realized the chimp wasn't alive, and just sniffed it curiously. That gave me a chance to pull him back.

In the meantime—what with the sudden jostling and fast footwork—Chief Bobkin almost fell into the crypt. His frantic

arm-flapping to keep his balance made the spectators laugh louder than ever, and also made the chief's face take on a beet-red hue. Once he got stable again, he shot an angry glare at ESP McGee.

"You and your predictions!"

McGee shrugged. "I did warn you that when the crypt was opened, it would contain a shocking surprise."

That brought even more laughter. "He's got you there, Chief," someone guffawed. "Turned out to be a real shocker, huh?"

Chief Bobkin just grunted.

I could see now why Loser had charged at the chimp; he sure did look lifelike. In fact, he looked as if he were enjoying the joke, too.

"That's Junius Frome's dancing chimp, right?" said Nick.

"Probably so," I replied. "The one that did all those finger paintings."

There was a white card tied around the chimp's neck like the name tag on a Christmas present. The chief was so sore, he wouldn't read the card out loud; luckily, we were close enough to make out the words:

> An eye-catching stuffed animal is a source of artistic pleasure, well worth preserving and displaying in a museum.
>
> —Junius Frome

I have to admit it didn't make sense to me, but any way I looked at it, ESP McGee had scored again. His prediction had come true. Now Nina would have to admit he had special powers, right?

Wrong.

We spotted her and Sue Tuttle as we were walking back to get our bikes. I couldn't resist the temptation to rile her. "How about it, Nina? Are you ready to admit that McGee has ESP?"

Nina just gave me a cool, superior look with those slanty green eyes. "Are you kidding?" she said. "Don't tell me you think some kind of mental video showed McGee what they'd find in that trunk?"

"What else?"

"Why don't you tell them the truth, Edward Samuel McGee?" she taunted, turning to him.

McGee didn't get mad. He just said patiently, "Do you know something we don't?"

"No, you and I *both* know something they don't!" Nina retorted.

"Like what?" said McGee. He has this calm, even-tempered way of reacting to doubters, and I could see it was riling her up—as usual.

"Oh—you make me sick!" Nina fumed. She turned back to me and the other kids. "Remember what the chimpanzee's name meant in that African language?"

"Sure," I said. "According to Junius, its name meant dancer. What about it?"

"I suggest you go to the library and look up the word for dancer in a Swahili dictionary—like I did."

"Oh, come on, Nina. Give us a break."

"As McGee knows," she replied, "the Swahili word for dancer is *ngoma!*" And with that she turned and stalked off.

"So what's the big deal?" said Nick.

"Ngoma. Don't you get it?" I said. "The chimp's name starts with NG, the letters on the stone slab!"

"Well I'll be a monkey's uncle," said Nick.

Chapter Seven

NINA RAVINSKY wasn't the only one who thought she knew how ESP McGee had figured out that the countess's "tombstone" was a phony.

"I could've told you all along they wouldn't find Nadya What's-her-name buried under that slab," my sister Emily boasted while I was washing up for dinner that night.

"Oh, yeah?" I said.

"Sure," she said in that smug way she has, when she's trying to get under my skin. "The deception was obvious."

"If you could've told me all along, then why didn't you?"

"You never asked me."

"Okay, Miss Know-It-All, I'm asking you now. How would you have known?"

"From those letters carved in the stone."

"What about them?"

"NG—don't you get it? Standing for 'No Good!' " Giggling like an idiot, she ran off before I could flick soapsuds in her face.

Actually, when I stopped to think about it, I halfway believed Emily was right. Her version sounded just like one of Junius Frome's little jokes.

The next day was Sunday. I had no homework to catch up on and no energy to try and drum up a softball game. So after brunch and the Sunday comics, I wandered over to McGee's place.

McGee and I fooled around for a while, watching the fish in his mother's room-size aquariums and playing a home video game he'd designed. His dad's a computer expert, and there are several terminals in the house.

Then McGee surprised me by suggesting we pay a visit to Miss Agatha. He said he wanted to get a sense of Junius's personality from his sister, that understanding Junius better might help him solve the mystery of the missing paintings. It was an interesting idea, so I said okay.

He got out his bike, we went back to my house to get mine, and then we started off for Seacove. We'd barely gone a block when we ran into Nina Ravinsky, also on wheels.

"Hi!" she called out. "Where are you guys going?"

Something told me she'd already guessed where. But we told her anyway, and she asked if she could come along.

"Be my guest," I said. McGee didn't raise any objections, so we made it a threesome.

Agatha Frome seemed tickled pink to see us. She had her maid make some sandwiches, and under a little skillful

questioning by McGee, she was soon talking freely about herself and Junius.

"You mentioned that your brother didn't think much of the museum curator," McGee remarked.

"No, indeed," said Miss Agatha. "In fact, Junius made fun of him whenever he could. And not only Mr. Wolfram, but the whole town of Seacove."

"Why was that?" asked Nina.

"The townspeople didn't appreciate his painting or even attempt to understand what kind of pictures he was trying to create. And, being human, Junius resented it. So he retaliated by—I believe you young people would say—'mocking them out' every chance he got."

"You mean, with the dance performances by the countess and the chimp?" I put in.

"Not only that, but with the paintings he presented to the museum. You see, when my ancestors built the art museum and gave it to the town of Seacove long ago, a clause was put into its charter stating that the curator *must* hang any paintings the Frome family donates." Miss Agatha sighed. "I'm afraid my brother took spiteful advantage of that clause."

She rocked back and forth and thought for a moment; then she went on. "Have any of you seen his paintings? I mean the ones he presented to the museum."

Both McGee and I shook our heads. Nina had been to the Seacove Museum but couldn't remember seeing any of Junius Frome's work.

Miss Frome smiled bleakly. "No wonder, dear. His pictures are tucked away in a little room off the main floor. It's hardly more than a closet." She tapped her bamboo cane smartly on the floor. "Look here! Would you three like to go over there right now and see the paintings for yourselves?"

McGee and I eagerly agreed, but Nina said, "Are you sure the museum's open, Miss Agatha?"

"It's always open to members of the Frome family!" Miss Agatha declared with a steely glint in her eye.

She had her chauffeur bring out her limousine, and off we went. The Seacove Art Museum was only a three- or four-minute drive away. It was a modest brick building with Greek-style white columns in front.

Miss Agatha took a big, fancy, wrought-iron key out of her purse to unlock the door. The handle end was shaped into a three-ring curlicue design. Just then a woman with short blond hair and kind of an impish face happened to see us from the window and came rushing to open up.

"Oh, Miss Frome!" she gushed. "You should have let us know you were coming!"

The old lady smiled back in her queenly way. "We just decided to come on the spur of the moment, Miss Tinker. No reason to bother you."

"My goodness, Miss Frome! It's never a bother. Mr. Wolfram will be delighted to see you."

Mr. Wolfram, the curator of the museum, turned out to be an elderly, prune-faced man with horn-rimmed glasses and long dark hair that was turning gray. He was as gushingly polite as Miss Tinker.

"My dear lady! What an unexpected pleasure!" he said, bowing low over Miss Agatha's hand. I thought for a moment he was going to kiss it, but he didn't. "Tell me what I can do for you. A guided tour of our collection, perhaps?"

"Heavens, no," she said, a shade coldly. "I just came to show these young people the paintings Junius donated to the museum."

"Ah, yes! Those, er, paintings . . . in our, ah, Special

Gallery." Mr. Wolfram waved his hand toward a doorway on the right. "May I take you and your guests there, Miss Frome?"

"Please don't bother. I know the way."

I got the impression she didn't like the curator too much, but didn't *dis*like him enough to have him fired. His assistant, Miss Tinker, was standing a little way apart, watching the two of them. I saw her start to giggle and then put a hand over her mouth to hide it.

Somehow the atmosphere in the museum didn't seem very pleasant.

The "Special Gallery" was bigger than a closet. But, as Miss Agatha had said, hardly more than that. And the closed doorway didn't exactly invite people to enter. On one wall—hung any old way—were framed pictures that were obviously just crazy smears of color on canvas.

"The chimpanzee's finger paintings?" murmured Nina, though it was hardly a question. They couldn't have been anything else.

"Yes, dear," Miss Agatha said sadly. "You can see why it was so embarrassing when Junius presented these to the museum as great works of art, especially when Mr. Wolfram knew he must hang them."

The other pictures displayed around the room were more puzzling. With one exception, they were all the same color: a plain mud brown!

Miss Agatha glanced at McGee. "Can you guess why they look that way?"

McGee nodded. "I imagine your brother added a special chemical to the paints on his palette. It made them all turn muddy by oxidation after they'd been exposed to the light for a while."

"Exactly!"

Nina and I exchanged startled glances. Probably the same thought was going through both our heads: Junius Frome was a nut!

The one sensible picture in the room was a portrait of a man in a policeman's uniform. In a way, it looked sort of amateurish, and I found out later it was one of Junius Frome's early paintings. Still, it had a sort of forceful, slapdash quality—as if the artist knew exactly what he was trying to do, even if the picture hadn't come out looking exactly the way he'd hoped. What also helped to make it interesting was that all three of us kids recognized the man Junius had painted. He was a young version of Mr. O'Reilly, a retired town cop.

O'Reilly was quite a character. He was known throughout the area for his eccentric behavior whenever he went on a binge—like the time he tried to direct traffic with a baseball bat during the morning rush hour in the very heart of Greenport's business district.

"Was Mr. O'Reilly a friend of your brother's?" Nina asked Miss Frome.

"Indeed he was! One of the few friends Junius had in town, to tell the truth. After O'Reilly retired—as they politely put it—from the Seacove Police Force, Junius got him a job as night watchman here at the museum. But I'm sorry to say, he finally had to be let go from that position too, because of his unfortunate drinking problem."

When we came out of the museum, Miss Agatha took us to an ice cream parlor across the street and treated Nina and me to sundaes. ESP McGee chose a banana split. That ice cream parlor makes its splits extra rich and generous, and it was really something to watch McGee go to town.

In spite of his sawed-off size and the studious look his

glasses gave him, McGee is a tough, solidly built sort of guy. But don't ask me how he manages to put away all that sweet goo and still keep in shape. That's almost as much of a mystery as whether or not he has ESP!

Gradually his eyes began to glaze over, and he slowed down his spooning. At first I thought the banana split was making him sick. Then he seemed to recover. He pushed up his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"What's the name of that old tumbledown vacation hotel on the beach?" he said. "The one just up the coast from here."

"You mean Kew Lodge?" asked Nina.

"Yeah, that's the one. Kew Lodge."

"What about it?" I said.

"That's where the next ghostly appearance will take place," McGee answered.

Chapter Eight

MISS AGATHA looked impressed by ESP McGee's prediction.

Nina Ravinsky, of course, was a different matter. She was frowning as we came out of the ice cream parlor, and I got the feeling she was already sniffing suspiciously around McGee's statement, trying to figure out what had made him think of Kew Lodge.

Miss Frome took us back to her house so we could get our bikes.

"You going to tell the police about your hunch?" I asked McGee once we were on our way back to Greenport.

"Well, yeah, maybe I should," he said slowly. "I'll call Chief Bobkin as soon as I get home."

"Let me know the minute something happens, will you?"

"Sure thing," McGee promised.

About six o'clock the next morning Emily shook me awake. "Huh? . . . whuh ya want?" I mumbled sleepily. It was a good hour before I'd be ready to get up and shower and dress for school.

"Boy, you really sleep nutsy," she said.

I was hanging upside down out of bed, my hips and legs on the mattress and my head and shoulders practically on the floor.

Emily shook me again. "McGee's on the phone. You want to take the call or don't you? I can tell him you're in repose. . . ."

Good grief. It was barely six, and already Emily was practicing her new word for the day. I pulled myself together and staggered downstairs to the phone in the front hall. Halfway there I remembered why McGee was calling and got all excited.

"What's up? Did your prediction come true?"

"Well, it looks that way. Last night, around midnight, a radio call from a boat out in the sound got patched through to the police. The guy on board said he'd just spotted some weird lights at Kew Lodge and thought something funny might be going on."

"No kidding!" I shouted. "Did the cops check it out?"

"Yeah. Looked like the place had been ransacked. The chief asked me to go over after school—to take a reading, as he put it. Want to come along?"

"You bet!"

"Great. Chief Bobkin said he'd have a patrol car waiting for me when school lets out, so our ride's all set."

I hung up, dizzy with admiration. McGee was amazing! How could anyone doubt his powers of ESP after a demonstration like that?

But guess what. Someone did: Nina Ravinsky.

When we got to school she was waiting for us by the front entrance. She'd heard the news about the break-in at Kew Lodge over the local radio. And that wasn't all.

"After we came back from Miss Agatha's house yesterday, I kept wondering what made you think of Kew Lodge, Edward. And the answer finally occurred to me."

"No kidding?" said McGee. He wasn't trying to be a wise guy; he was really interested. "What was the answer?"

Nina smiled mysteriously. "I'll show you at lunchtime," she said. "I've even talked my mom into giving us a lift—if you're game to go."

We were both mystified, but we said okay. A few hours later we were in Mrs. Ravinsky's station wagon, heading for Seacove. We stopped at the entrance to Frome Gardens, Nina got out, and we followed her.

Nina went straight to the park gate and pointed to a bronze plaque that was mounted on the right-hand brick pillar. The tablet bore this inscription:

Go down to Kew in lilac-time,
in lilac-time, in lilac-time
Go down to Kew in lilac-time
(it isn't far from London!)
And you shall wander hand in hand
with love in summer's wonderland
Go down to Kew in lilac-time,
(it isn't far from London!)

—Alfred Noyes

"Who's Alfred Noyes?" I said.

Nina gave me an exasperated look. "He's an English poet, as if that were important, which it isn't, and those lines happen to be from 'The Barrel Organ.' But the point is, as soon as I remembered reading that quotation here at the park on Saturday, I called Miss Agatha. She told me it was Junius's favorite poem, and that he had this plaque put up because of all the lilacs in Frome Gardens."

"Hmm," said McGee. "And you think he meant it as a clue that there's something hidden in Kew Lodge?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Nina retorted. "Look, when Junius was alive, the townspeople treated him and his paintings as a joke. So he got even by poking fun at *them.*"

"And now that he's dead," McGee took over, "you think he's still playing games—from beyond the grave, so to speak. For instance, with that funeral parlor painting, and the tomb containing the stuffed chimp. And now this quotation referring to Kew Lodge."

"Right! Junius owned Kew Lodge, by the way. That's something else I found out when I called his sister."

"Wait a minute," I butted in. "Are you saying McGee guessed there might be a break-in at Kew Lodge because he read the plaque?"

"Naturally," Nina said, as if she were talking to a halfwit. "If I saw the connection and he saw the connection, probably other people did too. And they might get the bright idea Junius meant this as a clue that his paintings were hidden at Kew Lodge. . . . Right, McGee?"

McGee heaved a sigh and plowed his fingers through his hair. "Nina, you're free to think what you like. I just get these, well, ideas or whatever you want to call them; I don't pretend to know how or why. I'm sure I've read that poem by Noyes—I

think it's in our English Lit. book. Maybe I've even read that quotation on the park gatepost before. And if those lines were floating around in my mind, you could be right—maybe that's what gave me the idea about Kew Lodge. If you want to think so," he shrugged and flung out his hand, "go right ahead."

For a second I wasn't sure if Nina was going to burst out crying or grab McGee by the neck and shake him. It was the same old story. Just when she thinks she's got him cornered, he slips out of the trap and leaves her feeling like a spiteful witch. Or—even worse—wondering if he actually *might* have ESP. Sometimes I think that's what Nina really wants: to be convinced McGee *is* psychic. But he'd be the last person to try to convince her.

"Oh, forget it!" She glared. "Forget I even mentioned it!"

We piled back into her mom's station wagon, and Nina sulked all the way back to school.

Me, I was too busy thinking to talk. Thinking two things.

One, McGee hadn't predicted there'd be a simple break-in at Kew Lodge. He'd talked about the next *ghostly appearance.* Those lights in the middle of the night sure sounded spooky, and they reminded me of the ghostly light at the mansion.

Two, suppose Nina's hunch was right. Suppose Junius had meant that quotation from the poem as a hint. And suppose somebody at the garden party read it and clued in and went to Kew Lodge looking for the missing paintings.

Maybe that unknown somebody had lucked out! Maybe now the paintings were gone for good!

Chapter Nine

A POLICE car was waiting for ESP McGee when school let out, just as Chief Bobkin had promised. Nina had asked to come along as soon as she'd heard what was up, and the police driver didn't offer any objection, so all three of us climbed in. He took Hillside Road into Seacove, then hung a left at the harbor and followed Shore Drive northeast along the beach.

Kew Lodge is located a little way beyond the outskirts of town, at one end of a chain of hills that enclose Seacove like a U. It faces the Sound, with a fairly steep, rocky hillside rising behind it. I'd seen it from the water a few times, but never up close before. The police driver told us the lodge used to be popular as a summer resort. It had had its own stretch of beach with a little boat dock, but it had closed about five years ago.

It sure looked rundown and ramshackle now.

When we went inside, it looked even worse. Most of the furniture had been removed when the hotel closed, so our voices echoed in the almost empty rooms. The wallpaper was salt-stained from the damp sea air, and the curtains had rotted and mildewed. Most of the windows were shuttered, but luckily the police had thought to have the electricity turned on, so we could see our way around.

"Looks like Attila the Hun's been through here," I exclaimed as we gazed around at the evidence of the ghostly intruders. The threadbare old carpeting had been ripped up, and what furniture was left had been ransacked—drawers pulled out, stuffing slashed open—to make sure nothing was hidden inside.

McGee gave me an absentminded nod and continued to stare at the mess. Nina started prowling around, peering into corners and closets.

There was a moth-eaten stag's head mounted over the check-in counter. I started around it to look under the counter but stopped short with a gasp.

The stag had winked at me!

For a moment I couldn't breathe; then I realized that one of its glass eyes was missing. Just as my breathing was getting back to normal, another thought sent my heart racing.

"An eye-catching stuffed animal!" I blurted out.

Everyone turned to stare at me. To this day, I don't know exactly how the idea popped into my head—it just did—but for a second, everyone simply thought I was nuts.

"What are you babbling about?" said Nina.

"That note Junius left with the chimp! This could be the 'eye-catching stuffed animal,' " I said, pointing to the winking stag's head.

After a moment's hesitation, Nina quoted, " 'An eye-catching stuffed animal is a source of artistic pleasure, well worth preserving and displaying in a museum.' Do you think . . ."

But I was already scrambling up onto the counter. McGee seemed to know what I was doing, because he handed me his Swiss Army knife. The stag's head was mounted on a wooden shield, and in a minute I had unscrewed the shield from the wall. But the knife was useless when I tried to remove the shield from the stag's head.

Until that moment the police driver had just been a curious onlooker, but now he stepped forward to solve the problem. He placed both feet firmly on the shield, took hold of the

stag's head—and yanked! The shield and the head parted company, and out fell a rolled-up canvas.

With shaking hands I unrolled it, then nearly threw it against the wall with disappointment. "For crying out loud! It's one of the chimp's finger paintings!"

"Sure looks like it," said McGee. "Probably the only one Junius didn't donate to the museum." He grinned at me. "So tell me, Matt. How did you figure it all out? Do you have ESP?"

For one brief moment I thought I *might* have special powers; then Nina brought me down to earth.

"Humph," she snorted. "Logic. Pure and simple detective work." Then she smiled. "But *good* detective work, Matt. Very good."

So, despite the letdown of finding the chimp's painting instead of Junius Frome's masterpiece, I felt pretty pleased with myself.

We all agreed that the best thing to do would be to take the painting to Miss Agatha. Not that she'd be eager to have it, but it was a memento, and hers by rights. So the police driver obligingly dropped us off at her house.

Miss Agatha was suitably impressed when we explained how McGee's prediction about Kew Lodge had led to the discovery of one of the chimp's paintings. "Most astounding," she said, giving McGee and me admiring looks through her lorgnette. "I think the three of you have earned some refreshment, and it just so happens Cook has made ice cream. I hope you like vanilla—flavored with the real vanilla bean, of course; *not* extract!"

There was nothing wrong with Miss Agatha's deductive powers. It was obvious from the first spoonful that she had detected the way to McGee's heart.

She waited until we'd finished the last blissful drop of our second helpings before she brought up the mystery again.

"Edward," she said, "do you believe that my brother left all those ridiculous clues—the painting at the funeral parlor, the stuffed chimp, the poem, and that stag's head—just to fool people who might try to find his missing paintings?"

"Well . . . frankly . . . no," McGee said slowly. "Maybe your brother did enjoy fooling people, but I have the feeling he left the clues as part of a puzzle."

"Indeed?" said the old lady. "And if we can find the key to the puzzle, we'll find the paintings?"

"Key!" shouted McGee.

"I beg your pardon?" said Miss Agatha.

"Key," McGee repeated, but not quite so loudly. He looked as startled as everyone else. "You said, 'If we can find the *key*,' and suddenly I knew that a key was important to this case."

Nina stared at McGee. Half of her was suspicious, but again I had the feeling that the other half hoped this might be a genuine ESP experience.

"Hmmm," said Miss Agatha, tweaking her lower lip between her thumb and forefinger. Presently she got up with the help of her bamboo cane and invited us into her sitting room. When we were comfortably seated, she picked up the telephone and called her lawyer.

"Mr. Trimble," she said when he came on the line, "what can you tell me about Junius's keys?" There was a pause and then she continued. "So the keys in his desk drawer are the only ones you came across? I seem to recall another key ring from the days when I lived with Junius. It held the less important keys and the duplicates—the extra key to the coach

house, the key to the wine cellar, and so on. It usually hung from a hook on the basement landing, I believe."

Apparently Trimble couldn't recall any such key ring. Miss Agatha thanked him for his help and hung up the phone.

Next she called the real estate agent, Frank Prang, and ordered him to meet us at the old mansion in fifteen minutes and to bring the key. Then she rang for the chauffeur.

The tall, hatchet-faced realtor was waiting on the steps of the mansion when we arrived. "May I ask what this is all about, Miss Frome?" he inquired.

"Nothing to be disturbed about, Mr. Prang," the old lady replied. "I'm sure you and your staff are taking excellent care of Frome Mansion. We merely wish to check on something that may have been overlooked."

Miss Agatha led the way through the front hall, the high-ceilinged drawing room, and the dining room into a huge tiled kitchen. There she opened a big oak door that led down to the cellar.

Sure enough, when the light was switched on, we found an old ring of keys hanging from one of several wall hooks at the basement landing. The keys were dingy and covered with cobwebs, so it was easy to see how they had been overlooked.

The only catch was, now that the set of keys had been found, McGee didn't know what to make of them.

"Take your time, Edward," said Miss Agatha.

I could see that Nina was getting teed-off, not just because she figured McGee was putting on an act, but also because Miss Agatha was treating him with such awe and respect. Finally she had to say something.

"Why limit yourself to picking up psychic vibrations from keys," she said sarcastically. "Why not from the whole

house? Maybe if you held a séance, Junius Frome himself would tell you what to make of those keys!"

There was a startled silence, as Nina's words seemed to hang in the air.

At first I thought Miss Agatha might be offended, but then from the look in her shrewd old eyes, I realized the idea was beginning to grab her.

"Hmmm," she said, peering at McGee through her lorgnette. "What do you think, Edward?"

"Well, I . . . I don't quite know what to say, Miss Agatha."

Nina had been surprised when Miss Agatha took her suggestion seriously, but now she was looking smug. She thought McGee was stalling because she really had him cornered this time. I could have told her she had him all wrong.

McGee wasn't hesitating because he was afraid of her dare, or anything like that. It's just that he doesn't like testing his powers to show off or to try and prove anything to anybody.

While she was waiting for McGee's answer, Miss Agatha put the key ring back on the hook and turned to the realtor. "By the way, Mr. Prang, did a person named Hakim ever ask to go through the house—before I told you not to admit any more prospective buyers?"

"Hakim?" The real estate agent frowned.

"Yes, Ulysses Hakim. An art dealer from New York, rather large and stout and quite a dandy."

"No, Miss Frome. I didn't speak to any such person. At the risk of appearing inquisitive, why do you ask?"

"Just wondered, that's all. He once phoned me to ask about Junius's paintings, and I also spoke to him at the park on Saturday. I wondered if he might have been snooping around."

"I can assure you that is not the case," he said. He looked a bit uncomfortable; then he cleared his throat and went on.

"Speaking of art dealers, though, are you aware that Mr. Wolfram went through the house?"

"Mr. Wolfram, the museum curator?" Miss Agatha looked startled. "What on earth did he want?"

"Well, he seemed to have his eye on individual items—the dining table, the breakfront, and that four-poster in the master bedroom. Lots of fine old Victorian furniture in this house, you know. He said, if you ever decided to sell any of it separate from the house, he would be willing to make an offer."

"Hmph. Funny he didn't ask me to my face when I saw him Sunday at the museum. But perhaps he thought it wasn't the proper time or place to talk business."

Nina was getting impatient. "Well, what's your answer, McGee?"

McGee frowned and ran his fingers through his hair.

Prang was getting impatient, too. He glanced at his watch and ahemmed once or twice. Finally he took out his wallet and plucked out one of his business cards. "Tell you what. If Miss Frome will excuse me, I really must be getting back so my secretary can close up the office. But this card has both my business and home phone numbers on it. If you do decide to hold a midnight, er, ghost hunt here—and if Miss Frome and your parents give their permission—call me and I'll come back with the key to let you in. How about that?"

"I've already made up my mind," blurted McGee.

"Oh, yeah?" said Nina, crossing her arms. "So what did you decide?"

"I accept your dare to hold a séance. I think I *can* clue in to whoever's been causing all this spooky stuff around Seacove. What's more, I believe I may even be able to discover the secret of Junius Frome's lost paintings!"

Chapter Ten

ESP MCGEE'S announcement was a real bombshell. He spoke so confidently, even Mr. Prang looked impressed. Miss Agatha promptly gave the project her blessing, so that was that.

"Ask your other young friends to come too," she suggested. "If you aren't successful in contacting Junius, perhaps you will be successful at finding what the intruders were looking for. I always think that young eyes are sharper."

"Okay," said McGee. "How about Blimpo Bailey and Nick Cracus? They were in on this mystery from the beginning."

"Sure, and Jack Hopper," I chimed in.

"And I'll ask Sue Tuttle," said Nina.

Prang headed back to his office after giving the house

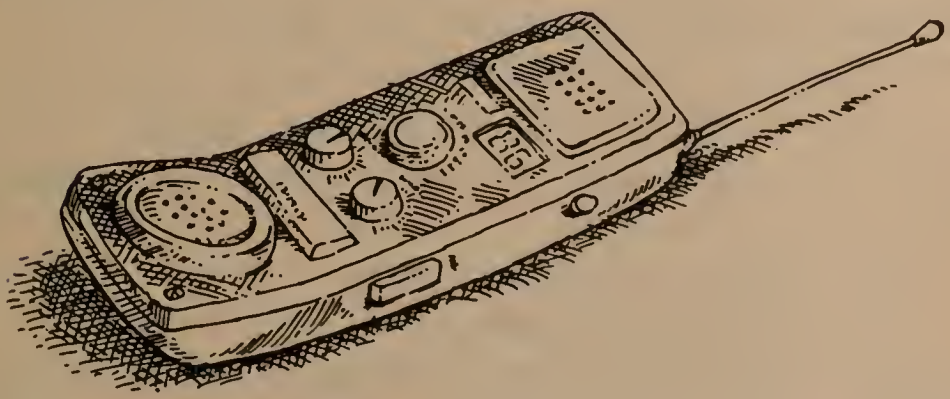
key to McGee; then Miss Agatha took all three of us home in her limousine. We agreed to meet at McGee's house with our bikes and start out for the mansion at about 7:30. Provided, of course, none of our folks made a fuss.

As it turned out, my parents weren't a problem. However, when I phoned Jack Hopper, it was no soap. He was flunking social studies and was under strict parental orders to stay home every evening until he finished writing two overdue reports.

After dinner I biked over to McGee's and found out Nick wouldn't be coming, either. He and his dad had taken off for a Yankees' night game in New York. But Nina and Sue soon arrived, followed by Blimpo Bailey—his bike basket stocked with enough food to last a month. Then all of us headed for Seacove via Hillside Road.

The weatherman on the evening news had forecast a possible storm and, in fact, we saw a few flickers of lightning. But the sky hadn't clouded over yet, except in the west, so we figured, with luck, the storm might hold off till after midnight.

Our first stop in Seacove was the police station. McGee went in for a word with Chief Bobkin and came out with a walkie-talkie.



"What's that for?" Blimpo asked.

"To call for help. In case of emergency, I'll be able to speak directly to the desk sergeant."

Blimpo looked uncomfortable when McGee mentioned the word "emergency." To be perfectly honest, I didn't feel any too comfortable either, especially when we let ourselves into Frome Mansion a short time later. There was something about that old place that gave me the willies. The white covers draped over the upholstered furniture looked spooky, and the thought of trying to contact a dead man at midnight didn't make me feel any cheerier.

McGee immediately tried out his walkie-talkie and got a quick response.

"Any sign of spooks?" the sergeant inquired, with a hint of tongue in cheek.

"Not yet," McGee reported evenly. "Everything's quiet so far."

"Glad to hear it. Well, let me know if you run into any emergencies. Over and out for now."

I suppose that should have put us all in a more relaxed state of mind. Actually it just made me start imagining what kind of emergencies might come up. Like maybe the countess's corpse falling out of a closet when we opened the door. Or a ghostly hand grabbing me by the throat.

"Well, what should we do first?" McGee asked.

"Let's explore the place," Nina suggested.

"Good idea," I said. "And as we go through the rooms, let's turn on all the lights."

Sue laughed. "Get serious, Matt."

She didn't realize I *was* serious.

You could see the Fromes had lived in high style. There were bellpulls and dumbwaiters dating back to the days when

they must have had an army of servants, a ballroom and game room, big marble fireplaces, bathrooms with giant tubs and fancy brass fixtures—even a statue that McGee thought had probably once been used as a hatrack. But there were also signs that the place had run down and grown shabbier in those final years when Junius Frome had shut himself up away from the rest of Seacove.

We took a look up in the attic, thinking that might be a place where Junius could have stashed his paintings. But it was emptier than we expected. Just some stacks of old magazines, discarded furniture, a broken birdcage—stuff like that.

Sue and I were a few steps ahead of the others as we came down from the attic to the third floor, and I heard a voice whisper, *"What are you doing in this house?"*

I froze and turned to McGee. "What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything," he replied.

"Neither did I," said Blimpo.

"Somebody said something," declared Sue.

"What are you talking about?" said Nina.

"Shhh. Listen," I said.

We listened for a few minutes and heard nothing more, so we went on with the search. But nobody laughed or made any more wisecracks about leaving lights on.

So far we hadn't done much more than stick our heads into the rooms, and we still had hours to go till midnight. So McGee suggested we give each room a once-over search, even though they'd probably already been checked out long ago by Miss Agatha and the lawyer.

"Okay, where do we start?" I asked.

"**Anywhere you like. I'll take the kitchen and the pantry.**"

I saw Nina and Sue exchange furtive glances. I think

maybe they'd been assuming the same thing I had: that we'd all search together. But McGee's remark implied we would spread out and each search on our own.

Well, I didn't like to seem *too* chicken, and both Sue and Nina were too proud to let on they might be nervous. So we didn't argue with his suggestion. Blimpo, however, quietly tagged along with me . . . and I didn't mind a bit.

Not long after that, Nina suddenly poked her head in the doorway of the bedroom we were searching. She looked pale.

"Did you guys say something?" she asked.

"Nope," I said. "Why?"

"Guess I was imagining things."

"Such as?"

"I thought I heard a voice . . . kind of faint and far-off . . . saying, *'Go away! Go away!'* "

We stared at each other, not quite knowing what to say. It may sound funny, but I liked Nina a lot better knowing she wasn't always ice-cool.

The only one who didn't seem the least bit uneasy was McGee.

When we finally worked our way down to the main floor, he was standing in the middle of the main drawing room, gazing up at a picture over the fireplace. It was a painting of a Civil War general on a horse. He looked as if he might have been one of Agatha's ancestors.

"What's so interesting?" I asked McGee.

"I'm just wondering if there might be a wall safe behind that picture," he murmured.

"There's one way to find out," said Nina. She was using her needling voice again—maybe trying to sound brave.

"You're right," McGee said, nodding. He went over to the fireplace, reached up, and gave a little tug on one corner

of the picture. Sure enough, the painting swung away from the wall. Behind it was a very businesslike steel safe!

"Next question: how do we find out what's in it?" I asked.

"Open it up," said McGee. "If we can."

He pulled a footstool over the mantel and stood on it to get a better look at the safe. "It has both a key lock and a combination dial," he announced.

"Great," said Nina, with a hint of sarcasm. "Are you sure there isn't a dead bolt, too?"

"You suppose Miss Agatha and Mr. Trimble know about this?" I asked McGee.

"Just what I was wondering." He got down from the stool and headed for the kitchen. When he came back, he was holding the old key ring we'd found earlier that day. Only two or three of the keys were the right size and shape to fit the keyhole in the safe. The second one he tried worked.

"How about the combination?" said Nina.

McGee had already pulled out the key and was peering at it. "This may be it, scratched on the side of the key," he muttered.

Much to Nina's annoyance, the guy seemed to have an answer to everything. He twirled the dial and pretty soon he had the door open!

Inside, the safe seemed to be divided into separate drawers and cubbyholes. McGee started poking through them, one by one. Meanwhile, of course, I was dying of curiosity.

"Nothing so far," he reported, as if reading my mind.

Just then a flash of lightning lit up the front windows. There was a tremendous thunder clap, and Nina let out a scream!

Chapter Eleven

McGEE almost fell off his stool and the rest of us jumped. The thunder and Nina's scream had startled us all out of our wits. Nina was blushing a gorgeous shade of pink. You could see she hated herself for showing any sign of nerves but, like it or not, she was shaking all over.

"What's the matter?" Sue gasped.

Nina pointed a trembling finger at one of the windows and tried to get her voice working again. "I just saw a . . . a monkey face! It was p-p-peering in at us!"

"A monkey face?" I echoed foolishly.

"Yes, a monkey face!"

Could it have been the ghost of Junius Frome's chimpanzee Ngoma? The thought seemed too crazy to say out loud.

McGee jumped off the stool and ran to the front door.

The rest of us went after him. By the time we got to the door, he'd switched on the porch light and was looking around outside.

"See anything?" I asked as we joined him.

"Nope."

"Well, don't tell me it was just my imagination!" Nina fumed. Now that she'd gotten hold of herself, she was ready to take on McGee again. But he didn't seem the least bit annoyed.

"I don't think it was your imagination," he told her. "I think someone's playing tricks on us."

If his answer was supposed to make us feel better, it didn't work.

"We can look around and try to catch the guy," McGee went on, "but frankly I don't think we stand a chance of spotting him."

I had to agree. The sky was all clouded over by this time, and it was too dark to see more than a few yards in any direction.

"Oh, forget it," Nina snapped.

We went back inside, and McGee got back up on the stool to finish checking out the safe again, but that turned out to be a waste of time. It was empty. He closed the safe and swung the picture back in place. Then he sat down in an easy chair to think.

"What next?" I said.

McGee didn't answer. He was staring at the old key ring, handling the keys one by one.

There was a slow, deep rumble of thunder that seemed to echo in all directions, as if some giant bowler had just rolled a strike clear across the sky.

Suddenly, McGee looked up at Nina. "Is there any reason why we have to wait until midnight to hold our séance?"

"I guess not," she replied.

"Then let's get on with it," said McGee. "I think the conditions are perfect right now."

It occurred to me that I didn't know anything about holding séances. "What do we do?" I asked, feeling dumb.

"We arrange our chairs in a circle and link hands," said Sue. "Then we wait for the spirits to contact us."

When we were comfortably seated, Nina turned to McGee. "Do you want to summon the ghosts of this house, or shall I?"

"Feel free," McGee replied with a shrug. "When it comes right down to it, I don't know much more about holding séances than Matt does."

"Okay," said Nina. "Now everyone close your eyes and be quiet."

We obeyed. After a while, the silence began to stretch out uncomfortably. Also, my palms began to sweat. Finally Nina spoke. "Is anyone here?" she said quietly.

The silence stretched out again.

"Are you here, Countess Nadya?" Nina called softly.

Nothing happened.

"Can you hear me, Junius Frome?"

A chill shot down my spine, and the hairs at the nape of my neck bristled. Maybe it was just the weather, but I had a feeling something was about to happen.

Something did.

There was an end-of-the-world thunderclap. The whole mansion shook, and lightning blazed in all the windows. Then the lights went out, plunging us into darkness.

Everyone started talking at once, but McGee's voice cut through the noise. "Keep cool, everyone; don't move. The lights may come back on."

We all sat tight, but the lights didn't so much as flicker.

"Great," said Nina. "Here I am, stuck in a dark house, one

wise guy outside who likes to scare people, and another wise guy inside who pretends he's got ESP."

"Aw, come on, Nina," I said.

"You have to admit the séance was a flop," said Nina.

"Not really," said McGee. "I know now who holds the secret of Junius Frome's missing paintings."

"Who?" we all chorused.

"O'Reilly, the retired cop and watchman whose picture we saw at the Seacove Museum."

"You're kidding," I said.

"Why O'Reilly?" asked Blimpo.

"I'll explain later," said McGee. "First I want to call police headquarters and talk to Chief Bobkin."

"Where's the walkie-talkie?" I asked as I heard McGee get up from his chair.

"I thought I left it on the horsehair sofa, but it isn't here now," said McGee.

We all got up and started groping our way through the darkness to try and help him find the walkie-talkie. There was a crash as Blimpo tripped over a stool, bumped into Nina and Sue, and fell heavily to the floor—taking both of them with him. When everyone's legs and arms were sorted out, McGee announced from the doorway, "Here it is."

There were several clicks, but otherwise total silence.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"The thing isn't working," said McGee. "Wait a minute." I heard vague noises as he fiddled with the transceiver—also a muttered exclamation.

"What's going on?" said Nina.

"The walkie-talkie's dead," said McGee. "Someone swiped the batteries."

Chapter Twelve

I GUESS I was even more flustered and confused than I realized, because it took awhile for the news to register. "The walkie-talkie worked when you tested it," I reminded McGee.

"That was when it had batteries," he said patiently. "Now they're gone. Somebody yanked them out."

"Yanked them out?" I repeated. Then it hit me: someone was in the house with us . . . someone who wanted to prevent us from calling the police.

"Let's get out of here," wailed Blimpo.

"You took the words right out of my mouth," said McGee. "We've got to get to the police."

Luckily, whatever ghostly business was going on, it hadn't included our bikes. They were still parked out on the driveway where we'd left them. The trouble was, we no longer

had the porch light or even a glow from the windows to see by. Nevertheless, we started down the driveway with me in the lead, trusting instinct to guide us—and dumb luck.

All of a sudden, something big and dark hurled itself at me! And the next thing I knew, my bike was flying one way, and I was sprawling all over the grass by the driveway! McGee and Nina barely managed to stop fast enough to avoid joining me. Meanwhile, something was slobbering all over my face—something about the size and weight of a baby elephant.

"Loser!" I gasped. "Get off me, you idiot!"

I guess I shouldn't have gotten mad at the old nuisance when he was just trying to show how much he loved me. But the fact remained, that spill hurt. Also he'd scared the wits out of me, just when I was trying to calm down from the effects of Frome Mansion.

When Emily took Loser out for his evening tree-sniff, he must have picked up my scent and decided to find out what had happened to the Young Master.

As I scrambled to my feet, Loser flopped down on the ground, panting and jiggling all over like an out-of-time engine with dirty plugs. His long trot from Greenport to Seacove had winded him.

"Tough luck, Buster," I scolded. "You're going to have to trot some more. I sure can't carry you!"

We got on our bikes again, heading for the police station.

When we got there, another setback was in store. Chief Bobkin was no longer on duty.

"He's gone home for the night," said the desk sergeant, flicking ashes off his cigar.

"Please call him!" McGee said politely but firmly.

"What if he's asleep?"

"Then wake him up!"

"Now wait just a minute, kid," said the sergeant, narrowing his eyes and jutting out his jaw. "You may be some kind of hotshot, but I'm running this—"

"Please, just do as I say!" McGee interrupted. "I've got no time to argue! Just tell the chief to meet us as soon as he can at ex-officer O'Reilly's place!"

When the sergeant continued to look stubborn, McGee leaned across the desk and looked him straight in the eye. "What will you say to the chief when he finds out you cut him out of a big arrest and a lot of important publicity," he said in an icy voice. Then he turned on his heel and headed for the door.

I'll never get over how McGee always seems to know exactly what to say to convince people to do what he wants. When we left the station, the sergeant's jaw was practically on the floor—and his hand was on the phone.

Loser was lying by the door, panting hard, his tongue lolling out. He gave me a heartrending look as if to say, "Honest, boss! I can't go another step. I have to rest."

"Oh, Loser," I said. "What am I going to do with you?"

"I'll take care of him," said Blimpo, who was looking winded, too. "You guys go on."

So we grabbed our bikes and headed off again.

O'Reilly's shack is on the east edge of town, down near the waterfront. A lot of kids know where it is, because O'Reilly picks up a little extra cash selling live bait. As we pedaled there at top speed, McGee did some explaining.

"Those spooky messages we heard were coming through voice tubes," said McGee. "I spotted one when I searched the kitchen, but I bet Junius had them throughout the house so he could call his servants—no matter what room he was in."

"Voice tubes? Why didn't you point them out to us?" I said. "We might've been able to—"

"I didn't want to let the crooks know I was wise to them," McGee cut me short. "It's a cinch they were eavesdropping."

"Why?" said Nina.

"To find out if we'd discovered something. I knew they were listening. That's why I fed them that baloney about O'Reilly."

"Baloney?" Sue exclaimed. "You mean O'Reilly doesn't know the secret of Junius Frome's missing paintings?"

"Listen, half the time he hardly knows which end is up. All I was trying to do was draw the crooks out into the open."

"You're using poor Mr. O'Reilly as bait," Nina said disapprovingly. "Is that what you're telling us?"

"Well, yeah," McGee admitted uncomfortably. "But I expected to tip off Chief Bobkin so he could be on hand to collar the crooks when they showed up."

"Wouldn't they have overheard you?" I said.

"Not if I cupped my hand around the walkie-talkie and whispered right into it. Anyway, it doesn't matter now. They crossed me up by swiping the batteries out of the walkie-talkie while we were out of the drawing room."

"So the way it adds up," I said, "those crooks may be at O'Reilly's place already!"

"Uh-huh," McGee admitted unhappily.

Great!

As we pedaled along through the empty streets of Seacove, I shot a quick glance at Nina and Sue. I wondered if they were mulling over the same question I was. Namely, what the heck were we getting ourselves into?

We never really had time to come up with an answer. And maybe it was just as well. Before we knew it, O'Reilly's

shack was just ahead—at the dead end of a little blacktop lane. We left our bikes about twenty yards from the house and ran the rest of the way.

There was a light coming from the windows, and the shades weren't even pulled down, so we had no trouble seeing what was going on.

Poor O'Reilly was tied to a chair in the kitchen. He was dressed in a T-shirt and work pants. But he was also barefoot and so bleary-eyed, I figured they must have just woken him up. "They" being two thugs in stocking masks and long white butchers' smocks.

They were obviously threatening to beat up O'Reilly if he didn't talk and talk fast. In fact, one window was partly open and we could hear every word they said.

"Come on! Don't try to play dumb!" said one of the thugs. "We know you've got Frome's paintings stashed away somewhere! Either tell us what you've done with them or you're going to need your nose straightened and a new set of teeth! You understand, you old fool?"

The thug's voice sounded faintly familiar. But he was coming on so rough and tough, I couldn't place it for sure.

McGee had seen enough. He kicked the door open and strode in like John Wayne taking on a roomful of cattle rustlers. We crowded in behind him.

"Let him alone," McGee shouted. "And don't think those stocking masks will do you any good! I already know who you are, Frank Prang and Ulysses Hakim!"

No wonder that one crook's voice had sounded familiar!

The two masked men were stunned. For a minute they just stood there gaping at us.

McGee made the first move. He aimed a stiff-handed chop at Prang's head. Prang flung up his arms to ward off the

blow, but it caught him off-balance and he toppled back against Hakim, knocking him sideways against the kitchen counter. Then Nina, Sue, and I plunged into the fray—swinging wildly and trying to grab the crooks' arms and legs.

But when Hakim fell against the counter, his eyes also fell on O'Reilly's old police gun, which was lying at one end of the counter in a clutter of odds and ends.

Hakim snatched up the gun and aimed it at us point-blank. "All right, you brats!" he snarled. "Here's where you get what's coming to you!"

Chapter Thirteen

I'M still not sure what might have happened—whether Hakim was just trying to scare us, or whether he really would have pulled the trigger. Luckily, we never had to find out.

Something big and black came hurtling through the open door. It slammed into Hakim like a furry cannonball! He went over on his back, and his gun went flying across the floor.

Prang tried to grab it, but Nina stamped on his hand. He let out a yell of pain, and I had time to retrieve the gun. Just to make sure he didn't give us any more trouble, Sue scooped up the cloth from the kitchen table and flung it over Prang's head. Then she and Nina pushed him down and sat on him.

The Black Avenger who had Hakim down was, of course, none other than my old pal Loser. I guess once he got his

wind back, Blimpo hadn't been able to hold onto him, and he'd tracked us to O'Reilly's.

Newfoundlands don't get mad at people very often, but when they do, look out—especially if one of them is on top of you. That was the position Hakim was in, and I could see he wasn't enjoying it. He was looking up at about a ton of dog with its lips drawn back, its fangs bared, and a growl rumbling in its throat.

Hakim's stocking mask was getting damp with perspiration.

We heard a car come roaring down the lane and screech to a stop outside. A few seconds later, Chief Bobkin came bustling in followed by a couple of uniformed cops.

"Okay, get up you bums!" he bellowed. "And keep your hands where I can see them."

I had to call off Loser before Hakim could obey the chief's order, and Sue and Nina had to uncover Prang and hoist him to his feet. Then the officers pulled off the thugs' stocking masks.

The chief's jaw dropped in surprise when he saw Prang, but he recovered quickly. "Both of you are under arrest," he growled. "Put the cuffs on them and read them their rights, men." He looked at his watch. "There's still time for live coverage on the 11 o'clock news," he said. And before any of us realized what he was up to, he had used O'Reilly's phone to alert the media.

O'Reilly was getting sore because no one had untied him yet. But the chief wouldn't let him loose until reporter Rick Powell and the local TV camera crew arrived on the scene. Then Bobkin posed for dramatic pictures of himself arresting the two crooks with poor O'Reilly in the background, fuming helplessly, still tied to the chair.

"Tell us if you will, Chief," said the TV interviewer, holding out his microphone, "how did you arrive at a solution to the recent mysterious events at Frome Mansion and Kew Lodge?"

"Well . . . hmm . . . suppose I let this young man answer your question," Bobkin replied modestly. "Several times he was able to, uh, provide me with useful little leads as I hunted down the accused criminals."

The TV interviewer turned to the camera and said, "Just in case any of you viewers haven't heard of him before, this is the young man whose powers of extrasensory perception have aided law enforcement officers time and time again. So now, Edward 'ESP' McGee, let's hear what your amazing sixth sense enabled you to see—yes, literally, *see*—behind all the events of the last few days!"

I could tell McGee was pretty annoyed at all the hype. But he kept his temper and tried to answer the TV reporter's questions in as few words as possible.

He told the television audience that after Miss Agatha had ordered the realtor, Frank Prang, not to admit any more visitors, the New York art dealer, Ulysses Hakim, had broken into Frome Mansion to look for Junius Frome's long-lost paintings.

"When they failed to find the pictures by themselves," said McGee, "Hakim and Prang began working together. They searched Kew Lodge, but they still had no luck. So tonight, when they found out my friends and I were planning to hold a séance at the old mansion, they decided to listen in in case we solved the mystery. However, we laid a trap for them by pretending Mr. O'Reilly knew where the paintings were hidden. They walked right into our trap, and Chief Bobkin promptly arrested them."

"And just where *are* the paintings hidden?" said the TV newsman, hoping for a big on-camera scoop.

"That is my secret for the time being," McGee said firmly. "It wouldn't be right to say any more until I've revealed the answer to Miss Agatha Frome."

At school the next morning, the kids mobbed all of us, wanting to hear more about our big adventure. Of course McGee was the star attraction, so while they were pestering him with questions, Nina and I had a chance to exchange a few words before the bell rang.

"Well, what do you think of McGee now?" I asked her.

Nina sighed and shook her head. "Nothing's changed, Matt. I'm still sure his so-called 'special powers' just boil down to smart detective work."

"What about last night?" I argued. "McGee knew who the crooks were, even before the cops pulled off their stocking masks. You have to admit *that* was pretty amazing."

"Not especially. I knew one of them was Frank Prang even before McGee named him."

"How come?"

"If the crooks were all set up to fool us at the mansion—I mean with those spooky voices coming out of nowhere, and that Halloween monkey mask at the window—then they must have known beforehand we were coming there to hold a séance. And Prang was the only other person who did, aside from our families and Miss Agatha, of course."

"Hmm . . . well, okay." I had to admit Nina had a point there. "But how about Ulysses Hakim?"

"What's so brilliant about that? If Prang was hoping to find Junius's missing paintings and cash in on them, he'd need an art dealer or fence to do the selling, wouldn't he?"

"Sure, but there must be a flock of art dealers and fences. How could McGee know Prang was working with Hakim?"

Nina couldn't answer that one.

When we got out of school that afternoon, Miss Agatha's chauffeur was waiting to pick up all three of us. McGee seemed to know what it was all about.

"Where are we going?" I asked him as the limo pulled away from the curb.

"To the Seacove Art Museum."

"What for?" Nina asked suspiciously.

McGee looked as innocent as a baby. "I just thought you and Matt would want to hear the solution to this whole mystery, that's all."

When we got to the museum, Agatha Frome was already there. So were the curator, Mr. Wolfram, and his assistant, Miss Tinker. Mr. Wolfram had closed the museum early that afternoon so we could have it all to ourselves.

"I understand you have something to tell us, young man," he said to McGee, "so the floor is all yours."

McGee stepped forward and cleared his throat. "First of all," he stated, "Junius Frome's missing paintings are right here in this museum!"

That announcement caused some excited babble, mostly from Miss Agatha and the other two grown-ups. McGee waited till everyone quieted down and then he went on. "I was sure of that last night. However, I didn't know exactly *where* in the museum. So I decided to try deducing the answer, which is what Nina says I do all the time." He grinned at Nina. "Do you know what I deduced?"

"Well . . . yes, maybe I do," she asserted. "We know by now that Junius Frome left certain clues. That line of verse on

the plaque sent us down to Kew Lodge. The painting he gave the funeral director pointed us to the tomb of the stuffed chimp. And the tag around its neck mentioning the 'eye-catching stuffed animal' referred to the stag's head, which had one of the chimp's finger paintings hidden inside it." Nina paused thoughtfully. "I suppose you might even say the finger painting brought us here to the museum, where the rest of the finger paintings are hung."

McGee applauded. "Excellent, excellent! So here we are at the museum . . . but where do we look next?"

Nina was stymied. "Don't ask me. You're the one who set this up. So let's hear *your* brilliant deduction."

"Fair enough," said McGee. "I believe Junius left us one other clue."

Nina lifted an eyebrow. "What?"

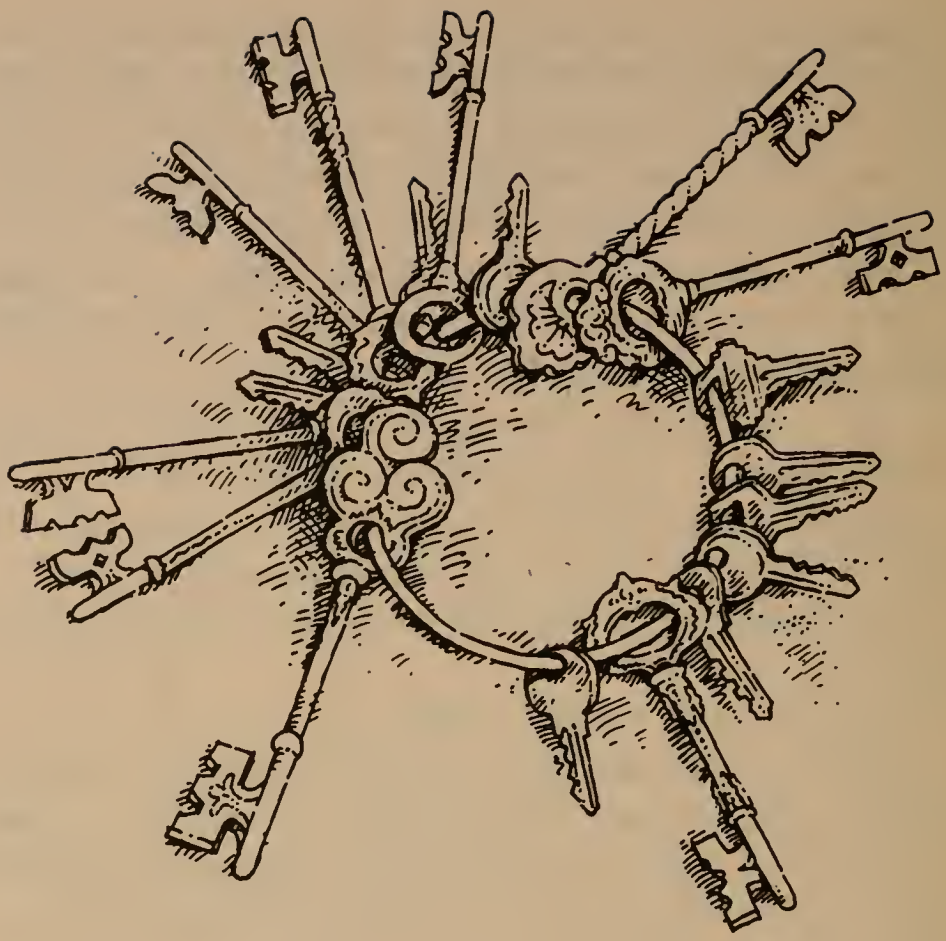
McGee led us all into the dinky little Special Gallery and pointed to the portrait of Mr. O'Reilly. "Now I ask you, with all these mud pictures and chimp's finger paintings, why would Junius donate this one sensible painting to the museum?"

Nobody could even offer a guess.

"Well, now," said McGee, "we know Junius got his friend O'Reilly a job as night watchman here at the museum, and we also know that O'Reilly eventually got fired because he was too fond of the bottle. Last night I noticed another connection."

He pulled the old key ring from Frome Mansion out of his pocket, and showed us one of the keys—a big, fancy, wrought-iron one with three curlicues on the handle end.

"I can see Matt recognizes this right off," McGee said, "because it's exactly like the key Miss Agatha has to the museum. So now we know Junius had a way of getting into the



museum. Suppose he used to slip O'Reilly a bottle now and then, to nip at while on duty. And then, late at night when O'Reilly passed out, suppose Junius secretly let himself into the museum . . ."

"Why would he do that?" Mr. Wolfram asked sharply.

"Because this is the one place no one would think of looking for his vanished masterpieces!"

The curator looked around in bewilderment. "You're not implying they're right in this room?"

"Not only right in this room, but actually hanging on the wall!" McGee said, beaming.

He asked to borrow some hand tools from the museum

workshop. Then he removed one of the mud paintings from its frame, and unstapled the canvas from its stretcher.

Underneath was a brightly colored painting of a woman in a ballet costume dancing with a chimpanzee on the lawn of Frome Mansion!

"Why, I declare! That's the Countess Nadya!" said Miss Frome, peering at the picture through her lorgnette. "Incidentally, I had a phone call from her this morning. The *Boston Globe* picked up the story of the missing paintings—and the missing countess—and when Nadya read it, she called to tell me she was alive and well and telling fortunes in a gypsy tearoom."

Mr. Wolfram and Miss Tinker went into raptures over Junius Frome's "masterpiece"! Needless to say, there were masterpieces concealed under all the rest of the mud paintings.

McGee was sure these mud paintings weren't the same ones Junius had originally presented to the museum. "The plain brown color made them easy to duplicate or exchange without anyone noticing," he explained. "I imagine whenever Junius slipped into the museum at night, he brought one of his camouflaged masterpieces and simply switched it with one of the mud paintings that was already hanging on the wall."

Personally I had a tough time trying to imagine why any artist would go to such pains to hide his own work, and I said as much to McGee.

"Junius had to put up with a lot of laughs and sneers about his paintings while he was alive," said McGee. "But I suspect he was confident that one day the world would come to recognize his talent. Remember, he was pretty shrewd. He had once been a banker and a stockbroker, and he had inherited the Frome family's ability to make money and hang onto it. If he *hadn't* hidden his paintings, they probably would have

been given away or destroyed or sold for practically nothing when he died. This way, they wouldn't even be discovered unless and until he was recognized as an artistic genius and people started looking for them. And by that time, they'd be worth a fortune!"

"Wow! I see what you mean, McGee!" I said. "Pretty smart of the old codger!"

Then I got red in the face, because I saw Miss Frome staring at me through her lorgnette. I apologized for calling her brother an "old codger."

"Never mind, my boy," she said with a gracious smile. "I daresay you're right. Junius *was* a smart old codger, and a true-blue Frome, when all's said and done! After all, he did donate his paintings to the family museum, didn't he? It was simply up to the town of Seacove to uncover them. And now, thanks to Edward, that has finally happened. His masterpieces *have* been uncovered—for all of us to learn from and enjoy!"

"Just tell me one thing," Nina said to McGee. "How did you know Ulysses Hakim was in cahoots with Prang?"

"Oh, *that?* Actually I spotted them as the culprits at the same time. In fact that's what made me accept your dare, while Prang was still around to hear what we were planning. I figured our midnight spook-hunt might give me a chance to trap both of them."

"But how *did* you know it was them?" Nina persisted.

McGee chuckled. "It wasn't by ESP. I was clued in by a purple flash!"

I wrinkled my forehead. "Come again?"

"Remember that lavender calling card Hakim gave Miss Agatha at the park on Saturday?"

"Sure. What about it?"

"Well, when Prang opened his wallet last night to give me one of *his* business cards, I noticed another lavender card tucked into one of his wallet pockets."

"Ah, hah!" I exclaimed, recalling the scene. "And he'd just gotten through telling Miss Agatha that he'd never talked to Hakim."

"Exactly. So I knew right off he was a liar, and I figured he and Hakim were working together on some shady scheme—like finding Junius Frome's lost masterpieces, selling them illegally, and keeping the profits for themselves!"

"Then I'm right," Nina burst out. "You solved the mystery by deductive reasoning."

McGee just grinned and shrugged. "If you say so."

I didn't bother to listen to the rest of their conversation. For one thing, I'd heard it all before. For another, I was too busy going over the case in my mind. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that deductive reasoning didn't explain everything. For example, McGee had been *certain* that Junius Frome's masterpieces were hidden under the mud paintings. He hadn't simply played a strong hunch. And he'd *known* that a key would be important to the case—before

we'd found the ring of spare keys. What could have made him so certain? Was it ESP?

I thought back to the lunch-hour conversation about haunted houses that had started this whole mystery. McGee had said that a house might hold images of what happened in the past. Maybe Frome Mansion was haunted like that, and maybe McGee had been able to sense what old Junius had been up to so long ago. But there was no way to prove it. The evidence was as muddy as the canvases Junius had used to disguise his masterpieces.

I shook my head. I'd just have to wait and hope that a new case would come along soon, and I'd have another chance to find out if McGee really has ESP.

A GHOSTLY CAPER

When Edward "ESP" McGee announced that "something spooky" was going to happen at the old Frome Mansion, I knew as sure as my name is Matt Terrell that something spooky was bound to occur. You see, McGee has ESP—that's what most of us believe, anyway—and he's used it to solve kidnappings, thefts, and he even saved our town from a nuclear meltdown. Just to see if McGee was on target once again, a group of us decided to explore the property.

At nighttime the three-story Victorian house was a pretty scary-looking hunk of real estate. No one has lived there for years, and it sure didn't look like it wanted any new visitors. But a light was flickering in one of the upstairs windows, and the spookiness didn't stop there! The flickering light led us to missing paintings, grave diggings, and mysterious voices. Another McGee prediction ha[illegible]e! Maybe haunted houses existed after [illegible]up against a tricky riddle and ma[illegible] solve it.

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